

Pretense, Cancellation, and the Act Theory of Propositions*

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Abstract

Several philosophers advance substantive theories of propositions, to deal with several issues they raise in connection with a concern with a long pedigree in philosophy, the problem of the unity of propositions. The qualification ‘substantive’ is meant to contrast with ‘minimal’ or ‘deflationary’ – roughly, views that reject that propositions have a hidden nature, worth investigating. Substantive views appear to create spurious problems by characterizing propositions in ways that make them unfit to perform their theoretical jobs. I will present in this light some critical points against Hanks’ (2015, 2019) act-theoretic view, and Recanati’s (2019) recent elaboration of Hanks’ notion of *cancellation*. Both Hanks and Recanati, I’ll argue, rely on problematic conceptions of fiction and pretense.

Keywords: propositions; representational content; representational vehicles; pretense

1. Introduction

Unlike other concepts that philosophy has used from its inception in formulating its proprietary set of questions (What *are* things ultimately (*made of*)? What do we *know*? What is a *good* deed, or a *good* work of art?), *proposition*, like *a priori knowledge* or *possible world*, are

theoretical notions that philosophers deploy to provide answers to such questions. They don't figure as such in questions the layman asks. The closest folk pretheoretical conception that philosophical theories of propositions develop is deployed in talk about sameness of content, and in generalizations like 'what S said/thought'.¹

Stalnaker (1978, 80) hence identifies the "essential function of propositions" as "to represent the world"; they encapsulate conditions on states of the world for different representational aims. The theoretical roles in their "job description" that they are posited to play develop this: contents of attitudes like belief or speech acts like sayings; (partial) meanings of utterances of declarative sentences, and perhaps others; bearers of truth and falsity, and the modalities of truth and falsity: necessity, possibility, probability; referents of 'that'-clauses; what gets assessed in determining the validity of arguments or – more in general – the rationality of rationalizing explanations.²

To properly perform these jobs, propositions should be sufficiently coarse-grained. It should be apt to ascribe the same proposition to an English sentence like "Sophie loves Carl", and to its translation into an SOV language like Turkish, or an ergative language like Basque (Collins 2014, 145). This would afford an explanation, say, for why it is rational for a bilingual speaker who has formed a belief in her English inner speech to express it in its Basque translation for the benefit of her Basque audience. For related reasons, it is desirable to assign the same proposition as content to perceptual experiences (assuming that they have them) and to the perceptual beliefs they help to justify.³ Or to imaginings and beliefs, to the extent that fictions can put forward the same contents for audiences to imagine and also for them to believe, see below, §5.

Writers including Gaskin (2008), King (2007), Soames (2010) and Hanks (2015) advance different substantive theories of propositions, to deal with issues they have raised, in the vicinity of a concern with a long pedigree in philosophy, the so-called *problem of the unity of propositions*.⁴ 'Substantive' contrasts with 'minimal' or 'deflationary'; the issue is whether or not propositions have a non-manifest nature that only reveals itself after difficult theorizing. One

might be skeptical of substantive views on account of a general attitude about the theoretical posits of philosophy. This might be motivated by Yablo's (2014a) "quizzical" standpoint – the notion that there is no reasonable way that controversies among proponents of *prima facie* conflicting substantive ontologies can be adjudicated. Or instead by the view that such entities are posits of an "easy ontology" (Thomasson 2015) and, as such, lack a "hidden nature" worth investigating and debating about. Or the skepticism might be rather grounded on a deflationary attitude specific to propositions; say, one motivated by the measure-theoretic perspective on their explanatory role promoted by Davidson, Perry, Stalnaker and others.⁵ Like numbers measuring quantitative properties, on this view propositions are just convenient tools used to represent through their relations the semantic relations among attitudes and acts in their job description. The latter motivation is of course consistent with the former.

Deflationary attitudes about propositions predict that substantive views will create spurious problems, by characterizing propositions in ways that make them unfit to perform their jobs. With a deflationary view in the background, this paper aims to show that Hanks (2015, 2019) recent substantivist, act-theoretic proposal, and Recanati's (2019) defense of it confirm this prediction. After briefly outlining the deflationary view I endorse in the next section, I will elaborate in the third on critical points that have previously been made against Hanks' (2015) view. In §4 I'll formulate by means of two different notions of ontological dependence what I take to be the contrast between Hanks' act-theoretic view, and the deflationary take I promote. In §5 I'll raise objections to Hanks' account of cancellation. In §6 I'll address Recanati's (2019) pretense-theoretic variation on Hank's account.

On the view I want to promote, the explanations that have been sought by ascribing substantive, controversial natures to propositions should be instead given in terms of features of the *representational vehicles* to which they are ascribed. In particular, the ontological dependence of propositions on (assertoric) representational acts that, I agree with act theorists,

we should envisage doesn't result from propositions *being* acts. It comes rather to the fact that propositions cannot exist without some (assertoric) acts representing them also existing, on account of explanatorily significant features of representational vehicles.

2. Substantive vs. Deflationary Solutions to Unity Problems

A venerable *unity of the proposition* problem worried the founding fathers of Analytic Philosophy, pursuing a distinguished tradition traceable back to Plato's later dialogues. What is it that holds the constituents of a proposition together? In fact, as it has been pointed out,⁶ there are several problems discussed under that label. Eklund (2019) calls *the representation problem* the one that has been discussed more prominently recently. This is the alleged problem of explaining the representational properties *of propositions*, in particular their truth-aptness and their having truth-conditions. It is related to the more traditional concern: "the judgment or sentence must in some way constitute a unity; its parts must fit together to produce something that can be true or false" (Davidson 2005, 82).

A deflationary attitude toward propositions sees such problems as arising on the (misguided) assumption that propositions, like the theoretical entities posited in empirical science, have hidden natures of which we can provide substantive explanatory accounts. King (2019, 1346) makes explicit the assumption. He says that the unity problems concern properties that "seem to call out for further explanation and whose possession seems as though it should be grounded in the possession of 'more basic' properties. It may be hard to give a criterion for being such a property, but properties like *being alive*, *believing that snow is white*, and *being morally good* seem to be examples of such properties".⁷

Against this, philosophers like Bealer (1998) and Merricks (2015) advance a ‘quietist’ or ‘primitivist’ view, opposing the project of providing substantive accounts. Now, in contrast with Bealer’s and Merricks’s own take, the deflationary view I want to promote takes on explanatory concerns in the vicinity of those addressed by substantive proposals, offering informative answers for them but shunning substantive commitments to the nature of propositions. It wouldn’t be sensible to dismiss the representation problem *for representational vehicles* by adopting a primitivist line. Hartry Field (1992, 322) famously made a similar point about propositional truth-minimalism: “on most conceptions of propositions, the question of what it is for a proposition to be true is of little interest, [...] what is of interest are the issues of what it is for an utterance or a mental attitude to be true (or, to express a truth or represent a truth)”. Unlike Field himself, many who embrace a deflationary take on the truth of proposition would nonetheless hold an inflationary view on that of meaning-vehicles.

On an influential account – still the default in semantics – propositions specify sets of worlds, by giving *ways* or *properties* the world might have (Stalnaker 1976); I will take propositions to be just such properties.⁸ As properties, propositions might be finer-grained than the sets of worlds at which they are instantiated, and thus not identical to them, thereby dodging well-known difficulties with the identification of propositions with such sets (cp. Stalnaker 1978, 79). They can also be taken as properties of entities smaller than worlds, as in the “truthmaker semantics” of Yablo’s (2014b) and Fine’s (2017). This further supports a deflationary standpoint on the representation problem, for no substantive explanation should be expected for why properties apply to things: this is just what properties do, by their very nature.⁹ Propositions understood along these lines do not have constituents in a substantive sense.¹⁰

Pickel (2019) shows how structured propositions can be made compatible with the standard type-driven functional application that accounts for compositionality in current semantics. He distinguishes the compositional semantic values of expressions, from the constituents of

propositions compositionally assigned to the sentences in which they occur. The deflationary viewpoint may help itself to this proposal, ignoring the structure of Pickel's propositions by viewing them as properties. In this way, the deflationary view has a compelling response to Duncan's (2018) argument for structured propositions, based on the systematicity and productivity of beliefs: to wit, that compositionality is just a vehicle-level feature. To account for systematicity and productivity we must ascribe structure to *representational vehicles*, but we cannot derive the structure of contents from the compositional structure of vehicles expressing them, not even their structured character. Duncan's argument concerns mental items, while Pickel's proposal is about natural language. However, the point extends to them, once we assume representational vehicles there too, as I think we should. Thus, there are good reasons to ascribe to visual experiences a "nonconceptual" map-like character, with a systematicity of its own, and a corresponding compositionality (Giardino & Greenberg 2015, Camp 2018, Lande 2018). The differences between the structure that experiences thus get, and that of the beliefs they may generate and justify, are once more vehicle-, not content-level. This leaves open that the experience and the belief fully share representational content.¹¹

3. Hanks' Substantive Account and its Discomforts

Jeff King, Scott Soames, and Peter Hanks have produced influential work in recent years aiming to provide substantive responses to the representation problem. They find it puzzling that, as King (2019, 1343) puts it, "propositions have truth conditions, and so represent the world as being a certain way, by their very natures and independently of mind and languages". In a quote above, King mentions properties like *being alive* as analogous cases for which we presume that there is a substantive account of their natures. He (2019, 1346) rightly points out that

“[s]entences, minds, maps, perceptual experiences all represent. And in each case we feel compelled to explain how/why such things manage to do this. Surely it would seem utterly mysterious to adopt the view that e.g. there is no explanation of how/why perceptual experiences represent things as being a certain way because that they do so is metaphysically basic.” He argues that, analogously, “we should think that same thing about the claim that propositions have truth conditions”. But, of course, the deflationist rejects the analogy.

King grants that the deflationary, primitivist line is justified in the case of propositions understood as sets of possible worlds, or as the properties the world might have determining them: “there need be no explanation of the fact that properties are instantiated or not by certain kinds of things”. But this doesn’t go to the heart of the matter. From a deflationary perspective on propositions, they are only said to have intentional properties (to represent and to be about things) in a derived sense, like the metonymical sense in which lion-statues are said to be fierce: one extended from the core sense in which the mental states and linguistic items to which they are ascribed are intentional.¹² Propositions in general might either be considered representational only in the extended sense, or should be denied the label on a more strict understanding. In either case, only the representational and truth-aptness features of vehicles demand deep explanations.

While King, Soames and Hanks grant that the truth-conditional properties of propositions are essential to them, in contrast with the deflationary attitude they take them to be seriously representational in so far as they obtain their truth-conditions from the activities of rational beings, in the way that mental states and linguistic items do. This combination of views is not easy to make sense of, as several critics have pointed out.¹³

As announced, in this paper I want to confront the specific *act-theoretic* account of propositions that Peter Hanks has provided, motivating it along King’s lines. Like Soames, Hanks (2015) has developed a proposal to deal with the representational problem that takes propositions to be *abstract types* whose tokens – from which they are claimed to derive their

representational powers – are intentional acts of rational beings. They both call the main such cognitive act *predication*, but they understand it in different ways. For Soames, it is a very general act, *entertaining*, lacking the specific illocutionary commitments of, say, asserting, or guessing. For Hanks they are instead assertorically committal. Here I will discuss Hanks' view.

Hanks draws inspiration from the near-universal character in natural languages of the three moods (indicative, imperative, interrogative), and the fact that current semantics ascribes sentences in them three different kinds of meanings: assertions, directives, questions (Roberts 2018). He identifies assertoric propositions (predications) with what is indicated by the first mood. Conventionally, however, the indicative mood can be used to perform a variety of acts, with different commitments: claiming, concluding, conceding, telling, swearing, conjecturing, assuming, and so on. Hanks declares (2019, 1400, fn.) that he wants to put aside “hypothetical predications”, in which predication is cancelled (more on this presently). Let us hence assume that it is the *commitment to truth* that distinguishes predications from other act types.

The problem with this is the one that led Frege to endorse what Hanks (2015, 9) calls the *constitutive* version of the force-content distinction, which he distinguishes from the *taxonomic* version. The latter is the notion that there is a meaning-component (a truth-conditional element, traditionally the proposition proper) common to questions, directives and assertions. The former is the stronger metaphysical view that there are such forceless sentence-level meanings, propositional contents that “are devoid of any feature that has to be characterized using concepts of force. Concepts of force characterize our actions. Propositional contents are prior to these actions and do not depend on them for their natures or representational features”, *ibid.*, 19.

Hanks rejects the force-content distinction in both interpretations. But, as Collins (2018, 3538-9) shows, his reasons for discarding the traditional view on the taxonomic issue are not cogent. As said, Hanks relies on the point already granted, that current semantics assigns different meanings to indicatives, imperatives and interrogatives. But this doesn't contradict the

traditional view. For current semantics *also* distinguishes meanings for NPs, meanings for VPs, and forceless meanings for phrasal combinations thereof, which are common constituents of the distinct semantic objects assigned to imperatives, interrogatives and indicatives. As Pagin (2019) notes, Hanks’s formalizations in fact also recognize them. The appeal to current semantics thus legitimizes force-endowed sentential meanings as much as their forceless common “parts”. I will therefore assume them in what follows, calling them (propositional) contents.

After outlining Hanks’ act-theoretic view on the representation problem, in this section I have rejected his argument against the traditional view on the taxonomic force-content distinction. This allows me to assume traditional forceless propositional contents in the next sections, which go to the core of the debate on that problem between act-theoretic and deflationary accounts. I will first show how a deflationary view might nonetheless take on the explanatory concerns on the truth-conditions of propositions that lead substantivists to assign them controversial natures, by moving them back to the place where they belong – the account of the representational features of representational vehicles – and why this offers a much sounder viewpoint.

4. The Ontological Dependence of Propositions on Acts

The debate between substantivists and deflationists hinges on the *constitutive* version of the force-content distinction. In a quotation above, Hanks frames it in terms of priority; at times it sounds as if he was speaking of *temporal* priority: “Suppose Obama enters a room, sees Clinton sitting in a chair and judges that Clinton is sitting. There is no neutral act of entertainment that *precedes* this judgment, whether conscious or unconscious. He just spontaneously makes the judgment and in so doing predicates the property of sitting of Clinton. He does not *first* contemplate the possibility that she is sitting and then decide to judge it to be the case. Nothing

like that has to happen consciously or unconsciously” (*ibid.*, 19, my emphasis); “Asking whether Clinton is eloquent is not to predicate eloquence of Clinton and then ask whether this predication is true” (*ibid.*, 24). I take the underlined temporal intimations to be misleading, irrelevant for the real concerns. What matters, I assume, is *explanatory* priority.¹⁴ Platonism itself is not at stake either; for Hanks assumes without reservations propositional types in his ontology. In any case, there is an alternative to unrestrained Fregean Platonism about propositions, compatible with the deflationary view outlined in §§1-2, which, I’ll now argue, is superior to Hanks’.

Hanks opposes the propositional contents of Johnston’s (2006) or Liebesman’s (2015) views. However, as Collins (2018, §7) points out, such views do not *assert* the explanatory priority of forceless propositions over representational acts; they merely *reject* the priority of the latter that the act-theorists endorses. As I will now show, it is consistent with the deflationary attitude towards unity to grant that (in themselves forceless) propositions depend on linguistic or mental acts that express them, in a sense I’ll momentarily explain.

I suggest that we frame the debate by means of the distinction between *generic* and *specific* ontological *dependence* (Mulligan & Smith (1986, 118), Fine (1995, 288)). These are the two notions: *x specifically depends on y* just in case, necessarily given the nature of *x*, if *x* exists, *y* exists; *x generically depends on the Fs* just in case, necessarily in virtue of the nature of *x*, if *x* exists, there are *Fs*.¹⁵ Let me illustrate the distinction with two examples. On a widespread common-factor view, perceptions *specifically depend* on perceptual experiences: no perception can exist without a perceptual experience constituting it also existing. But even if dependence relations are asymmetric, this is compatible with perceptual experiences *generically depending* in their turn on perceptions. This may obtain if it is in the nature of perceptual experiences that for them to have the contents they do, there must be some that constitute perceptions, fixing such contents. Note that I am taking the variables in the definitions to have properties/kinds/types as values; for those are the categories that act-type theories and their deflationary opponents

identify propositions with. Some views on the notion of metaphysical explanation and grounding I am assuming (cf. fn. 14) apply them to Platonic kinds like sets or numbers. That aside, some kinds are contingent. This is so on some views about social artifacts – say, Thomasson’s (2003) creationism about fictional characters; and this is precisely what propositions may well turn out to be, if dependent on representational acts along the *generic* lines suggested here.¹⁶

The second illustration of the distinction is closer to present concerns. It explains how the Principle of Compositionality and Frege’s Context Principle state the mutual *ontological* dependence of the meanings of sentences and that of lexical items in them, consistent with the asymmetry of dependence relations. Compositionality states that the meaning of sentences *specifically depends* on that of their lexical constituents; the Context Principle, that the meaning of lexical items *generically depends* on that of some or other sentences in which they occur. The latter can be true if, for lexical items to get their meanings, they must occur as parts of meaningful sentences by means of which representational acts like assertions are performed. Compositionality is thus compatible with the psychological fact about word-acquisition (if it is one) that the meaning of words is learned by getting to understand sentences in which they are used, and with related epistemological claims; but the contrasting dependences are both ontological, as they should – not, say, one ontological and the other epistemic, as in some alternative accounts of the consistency of the two principles (cf. García-Carpintero 2010, §3).

Given his identification of propositions with acts-types, the priority that Hanks asserts in the previous quotes appears to be the *specific* dependence of propositions on acts/forces:¹⁷

(SD) Each proposition is constituted by, and thus *specifically dependent on*, a particular representational act, hence a particular force

The rejection of (SD) is however compatible with the view that there is a *generic* dependence of contents on acts – the claim that, given their nature, propositions cannot exist unless there are (assertoric) representational acts with propositions as content. This can be defended by assuming

a deflationary take on propositions as equivalence classes of vehicles, together with the relation outlined above between the Context and Compositionality principles: propositions are ascribed compositionally to propositional vehicles, but for their sentential constituents to get meaning there must be (assertoric) representational acts made with sentences to which they contribute.¹⁸

The Frege-Geach point seriously questions (SD); for it appears to establish the need for constitutively forceless contents, i.e., that propositions may exist, with their constitutive truth-conditions, without being the contents of any act. This is usually illustrated with *modus ponens*. It is a valid form of inference, and hence to explain it is one of the items in the job-description for propositions. In the minor premise, a content is asserted. In the major premise, this content appears to be merely the unasserted antecedent of a conditional. It appears to be *forceless* there, in fact, lacking even the commitment-neutral force posited in Soames' account, *entertaining* – for the truth of the consequent is not presented as conditional on the obtaining of any act, not even one of entertaining the relevant content. For such arguments to be valid – as opposed to equivocation fallacies – the same entity should thus occur first forceless and then endowed with force; that same entity is a traditional forceless proposition.¹⁹

In this section I have advanced (SD) as an interpretation of Hanks' act-theoretic account of propositions, as committed to their *specific* dependence on assertoric acts. I have also shown how a rejection of this view (say, on account of the strength of the Frege-Geach point) need not embrace a straightforward Fregean Platonism on the constitutive force-content distinction, by subscribing instead to the *generic* dependence of propositions on (assertoric) acts. I'll move now to discuss how Hanks tries to cope with the issue by means of his notion of force-cancellation.

5. Hanks' Appeal to Cancellation

Hanks deals with the Frege-Geach problem by appealing to *cancellation contexts*. The idea is that, when they occur apparently unasserted, propositions still retain their assertoric force (given that they clearly do not have erotetic or directive force), so that a *modus ponens* argument like the one envisaged above does not come out an equivocation fallacy. It is just that the assertoric force in such a context is cancelled, so that “the cancelled act of predication does not count as an assertion and does not carry the usual consequences and normative requirements” (Hanks 2015, 32). *Prima facie*, it is difficult to make out how this fits consistently together. How could an act of predication, understood as having assertoric force (truth-commitment), be part of a condition in a conditional claim, without the act thereby having assertoric normative commitments?

Hanks (2019) aims to address a concern that Jespersen (2012), Hom & Schwartz (2013), and Reiland (2013) pose, in the form of a dilemma. First horn: cancellation *removes* the assertoric force. This is inconsistent with Hanks' view, because the resulting item still determines a truth-condition, in spite of lacking assertoric force (and, by assumption, either erotetic or directive force). Second horn: the remaining act of predication is just a part of the original one, without a component of assertoric commitment. This is also bad, because it appears to collapse into a view like Soames's; the remaining 'part' is undistinguishable from Soames's acts of entertaining.

Hanks (2019) contends in response that cancellation is not a further propositional act, but a (blind) context. He illustrates this with the case of actors on stage, or (I assume) fiction-making in general.²⁰ I suspect that Hanks doesn't want cancellation to result from a further propositional act, because this might have the potential to initiate a vicious regress. This is also why 'context' should not be understood in his proposal as in contemporary semantics, namely, as a set of attitudes presumed to be shared. But this creates a serious problem, for it seems to follow, as in fact Hanks grants, that “there is *nothing* the actor can do to make his utterances count as genuine

assertions”, aside from taking “himself out of the theatrical context” (Hanks 2015, 93-4).

However, many philosophers currently writing on fiction endorse a view that ordinary people assume, to wit, that fictions make assertoric acts, and may hence be criticized as false or praised as true. Many of these asserted contents are also inseparable parts of their fictional contents.²¹

Consider this compelling example from Stock (2017a, 24): “Nonhuman animals have gone to court before. Arguably, the first ALF action in the United States was the release of two dolphins in 1977 from the University of Hawaii. The men responsible were charged with grand theft. Their original defense, that dolphins are persons (humans in dolphin suits, one defendant said), was quickly thrown out by the judge”, in K. J. Fowler, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. This proposition is an essential part of the content the fiction-maker is putting forward for us to imagine; Fowler is not “taking herself out” of the fictional context in presenting it. However, given the theme of the novel and the moral seriousness with which she pursues it, together with conventions for the genre in which she writes, it is natural to take it also as a straightforward assertion, capable of transmitting testimonial knowledge; readers would rightfully object to the novel if the proposition was false. As said, this is correct according to compelling accounts, like Stock’s: we are entitled to acquire knowledge by testimony from reading this piece of fiction. Hanks is committed to rejecting these views,²² without properly engaging with them.

Let us thus consider the argument that Hanks suggests for this costly and intuitively implausible view: “there is nothing the actor can do to make his lines in the play count as full-fledged assertions. No act of subscription or identification or endorsement can convert his stage utterances into real assertions. The only way for his utterances to count as genuine assertions is for the theatrical conventions to be lifted and the play to end. This drives home the fact that these conventions create a context that overrides the assertive character of the actor’s utterances”, Hanks (2015, 96, fn). Cancellation is thus, on Hanks’ view, mandated by an as if unassailable convention, something like a divine decree – or, better still, a brute, unbreakable rule.

Hanks thus appears to share the view of conventions by assuming which Davidson (1979) appears to justify his infamous rejection that the declarative mood, or anything else, is a conventional indicator of assertion: “mood is not a conventional sign of assertion or command because nothing is, or could be, a conventional sign of assertion or command” (*ibid.*, 113-4); he justifies this on the basis that moods can be used for other purposes than the alleged conventional ones, as in fiction-making.²³ But, as I have pointed out before (García-Carpintero 2004, 154), this is an unconvincing view of convention. There is a convention of driving on the left in the UK, although members of the community committed to it are entitled to put it aside when shooting a movie about events fictionally occurring in the US, at least if they get the authority’s permission. Conventions, as much as related practices to which rational beings commit like agreements and contracts, come with *conditions of application* (Cumming, Greenberg, & Kelly 2017, 21-4) for the commitments they impose. Conditions of application may fail to apply under some circumstances, and with them the conventional obligations.

Conditions making it the case that conventionally imposed commitments are suspended include, I submit, the properly manifested intentions of the relevant members of the community bound by the convention. In the same way that, by making the pertinent request to authorities, the people shooting the movie intentionally make it the case that application conditions for the convention of driving on the left fail to obtain, speakers who utter ‘Alex is a fine friend’ ironically, or in a fictional context, intentionally suspend the application conditions for their mood to conventionally express assertoric commitment to its content.

Likewise, by uttering the previously quoted sentence in the context of a fiction in a serious realist genre, Fowler makes it intentionally the case that she is not just committed to norms regulating fictions, but also that the fact that such norms/conventions typically suspend the application of the commitments conventionally expressed by the moods of the sentences she uses to that effect is itself suspended in this particular case, so that she is *also* assertorically

committed to the content of that sentence.²⁴ I submit this is a much more plausible view on these cases than Hanks'. But we can see why it is not available to him – why I described as 'blind' the conception of cancellation contexts that he assumes. On this view, whether a speaker is in a "cancellation context", or takes herself out of it, depends in part on her intentions. But intentions have propositional contents: how do they get their fulfilment conditions? An appeal to predication invites the question again, starting a regress; a refusal to answer makes the account incomplete, making thereby a deflationary proposal better on account of its generality.²⁵

Hanks (2019) also relies on an analogy with games (football here, chess earlier, cf. Hanks 2015, 32, 94), but they are not more helpful. Given the constitutive norms of a game, a non-normative act may 'count as' a move in the game with normative consequences. There are contexts in which the act does not count as a move in the game and is thus not beholden to the norms – for instance, when one is teaching a learner how chess pieces move. To the extent that I understand the analogy, Hanks assimilates *cancelled predication* to the non-normative act that takes place in such contexts, deprived of its normative features in the game: "The act of tackling is analogous to the act of predication, and scoring a safety is analogous to performing an assertion" (*ibid.*, 1391). But the analogy doesn't really work. What is analogous in the linguistic case to the physical act in games (tackling) is the emission of the physical sounds or inscriptions, made (say) just for the sake of practicing elocution, or accidentally produced by a non-intentional agent; in general, what following Green (2017, 54) I'll call an "act of speech". But in such cases not just the assertoric force is absent; the representational component is gone as well. It doesn't help the cancellation account that there are events of a kind such that, instantiated under specific circumstances, do not have representational content, with or without force. What Hanks needs to explain by invoking cancellation is the *prima facie* appearance that there are events or acts that have truth-conditions, without having assertoric (nor directive or erotetic) force. His examples from games are not relevantly analogous.

In this section I have shown that Hanks' appeal to fiction and games in support of his response to the problem that the Frege-Geach point poses for (SD) in terms of cancellation contexts is seriously problematic. I'll conclude by critically discussing Recanati's alternative account on behalf of (what he takes to be) Hanks' view.

6. Recanati's Simulation Account of Cancellation

We have seen that Hanks' substantive account of the representational properties of propositions creates serious problems that he doesn't convincingly deal with. Aware of these difficulties, Recanati (2019) provides an alternative account of cancellation that he thinks adequately develops and supports Hanks's take on the representation problem. In this final section I will show that it fails to establish Hanks' view on the constitutive distinction, which, as we saw in §4, is committed to (SD). As I'll suggest, it may well be that Recanati ultimately doesn't really subscribe to Hanks' view, which is something that Hanks himself has suggested. Perhaps Recanati doesn't really intend to commit to anything more than the *generic dependence* of propositional contents on assertoric acts. In that case his suggestions also fail to support Hanks' act-theoretic view – which is his declared goal – because, as I have been pointing out, generic dependence is compatible with a deflationary view that takes on explanatory ambitions on the representation issue only for *vehicles* and dismisses them for propositions.

Recanati appeals to distinctions from speech act theory that he has developed elsewhere. He considers cases such as one in which Alex is being told by Bert, 'You are an idiot!', and utters in reply: 'I am an idiot. Very nice of you.' Alex's echoic utterance of 'I am an idiot' is obviously not assertorically committal. She is uttering a sentence that semantically conveys an assertion that she is an idiot. This would be her *locutionary act*, in Austin's terminology as interpreted by

Recanati (2013). The assertoric force in this act is conveyed by the assertoric sign (mood) in its role as what, on Recanati's interpretation, Hare (1970) called *tropic*. The utterance lacks, however, what is indicated by the assertion sign in another function which, on that interpretation, Hare called *neustic*. In this role, it indicates real assertoric commitment. However, Recanati argues that the assertion sign in Alex's utterance *does* perform a neustic role; it is just that the relevant assertoric commitment is being merely *simulated*. For Alex is echoing a truly committing assertion taking place in a different context – one made by Bert, in the example –, and the fact that she is doing that is essential to her ultimate communicative point.

The same obtains, according to Recanati, in fiction-making: in putting forward declarative sentences, the fiction-maker simulates genuine assertions of a fictional teller. This view allows him to circumvent the previous criticism of Hanks's, which he shares. For there is no incompatibility in both simulating a genuine assertion, and at the same time really making it; actors may simulate (the characters they play) drinking whisky by truly drinking the stuff.

Recanati (2019) submits that this provides a good account of Hanks's notion of cancellation, honoring his main tenets. He (*ibid.*, 1412) also addresses Hanks's (2015, 96) objection that his proposal in fact collapses into Soames's, by surreptitiously embracing the second horn of the cancellation dilemma outlined above, §3. The way Recanati sees it, while Soames, like Frege, takes entertaining to be "more basic" than asserting or judging (which involve a supplementary operation of endorsement), Recanati contends that he, like Hanks, takes asserting and judging to be "more basic", and cases of 'mere' entertaining to involve a supplementary operation (cancellation for Hanks, simulation for Recanati).

Note however that, as argued in §4, for Recanati's proposal to really vindicate Hanks', the ontological priority he posits should be that in (SD). The dependence of propositions on asserting and judging that the simulation proposal aims to secure should be *specific*, not merely *generic* dependence: each proposition with truth-conditions expressed in a particular act must be

the content of either a serious or a simulated assertion. I'll show now that Recanati's suggestions for the simulationist proposal, to the extent that they are cogent, fail to establish this.

In what follows, I will grant to Recanati that we engage in simulation in the echoic case he mentions, in related cases of irony, and in many fiction cases. However, I'll show that, while there is evidence that the simulation takes place in some cases, there are related ones in which we don't have any reason to believe that there is simulation. In fact, I think that the case of propositions expressed by embedded sentences in the Frege-Geach point, like antecedent of conditionals, already suffices to establish this. Unlike the examples that Recanati offers, phenomenological evidence is missing that simulation occurs in understanding them, and he doesn't mention any psychological evidence regarding what is going on at the subpersonal level either. But I'll make the same point by taking up the fiction case, not to beg the question.

Recanati appeals to Lewis' account of truth-in-fiction, which *prima facie* fits his simulationist proposal. Lewis (1978, 266) motivates it thus: "Storytelling is pretence. The storyteller purports to be telling the truth about matters whereof he has knowledge. He purports to be talking about characters who are known to him, and whom he refers to, typically, by means of their ordinary proper names. But if his story is fiction, he is not really doing these things." Given this, the worlds constituting the truth-conditions for the fiction, the fictional content, "are the worlds where the fiction is told, but as known fact rather than fiction. The act of storytelling occurs, just as it does here at our world; but there it *is* what here it falsely purports to be: truth-telling about matters whereof the teller has knowledge" (*ibid*). This appears to underwrite Recanati's proposal; for one to imagine any particular proposition that is part of the story is for one to simulate that it has been put forward "as known fact", i.e., (correctly) asserted.²⁶ As Alward (2009, 321) nicely puts it, on this view actual storytellers of verbal fictions "portray" fictional tellers, the way actors play characters: "fictional storytelling is best viewed as a species of theatrical performance in which storytellers portray the narrators of the stories they tell". Thus,

in creating *Don Quixote*, Cervantes “plays” the first-personal narrator – whom we may identify with Cervantes himself (cf. Wilson 2011, 114-5) – who first presents himself as passing information gleaned from archives in La Mancha, and then his translation of an Arabic historical narrative by a Cide Hamete Benengeli.

Recanati’s simulationist account thus nicely works in cases of fictions with explicit narrators. However, why should it apply in general? Suppose we adopt Currie’s (1990) or Walton’s (1990) view that fictions are *dedicated, sui generis* representational artifacts, with a specific illocutionary profile of its own. Why do we need to think that it always involves the simulation of assertions? Why do we need fictional tellers, in addition to the fiction-making acts? On such views, fiction-making is a propositional act with its own character (Stock 2017b, 20-7); the fiction-maker is putting forward propositions for the audience to imagine. In some cases, she does that by having fictional tellers asserting them; this is the case in film or theater, or dialogues in novels, when a character utters a declarative sentence, and the character is assumed to be a teller uttering it as known fact. The same is the case in novels that have explicit narrators; in these cases, an agent (the fiction-maker herself perhaps) “portrays” or “plays” a teller. But why do we need to assume the same even in cases of fictions without explicit narrators?

In most films, the figure of an explicit “shower” of the fictional world appears to be forced. If I say, ‘*S*, I guess’, is there a reason to assume that an assertion of *S* is first made, to be left merely simulated in the end? What if I say instead ‘*S*, let’s imagine’? To be sure, *S* must have its locutionary meaning, including a (“tropic”) force; but why should we also pose a “neustic”, committal assertion? Davies (2010, 389-91) convincingly argues that proposals to imagine in philosophical thought-experiments don’t follow the report model: the contents to be imagined are directly presented, without going through the pretend assertions of a fictional teller. On such grounds, Kania (2005) argues against the “ubiquity” of fictional tellers in fictions. To sum up, Recanati is right that assertion-simulation accounts for a some of the contents that fictions

convey. But this cannot be extended across the board; as Davies and Kania point out, there is no good phenomenological reason to think that it always applies, and Recanati doesn't provide any empirical motivation from cognitive science.²⁷

I should note in addition that Recanati's simulationist proposal also falls prey to the regress concern that Hanks aims to prevent by taking cancellation to be effected just by "blind" contexts (§5). For whether the assertion semantically conveyed by the utterance of a declarative sentence is merely simulated, in echoic utterances, irony or fiction-making, this depends in part on the communicative intentions of the speaker. The simulationist account must pose in the *explanans* representational states (intentions withholding mood-indicated commitments), thus creating a regress, or leaving their fulfillment conditions unaccounted for.

The generic dependence of propositions on representational acts survives the objections; I do think that there are good reasons to endorse it. But as I have pointed out, to abandon (SD) in favor of a claim merely of the generic dependence of propositions on assertoric acts doesn't vindicate Hanks' view. For this is compatible with deflationary proposals that avoid the Frege-Geach problem. I conclude that the explanatory tasks for which substantivists posit propositions with problematic features should be pursued by appeal instead to facts about the representational vehicles expressing them. Propositions themselves are better ontologically understood as noncommittally as possible.

Conclusion

In this paper I have assumed a deflationary view of propositions on which they are properties of circumstances of evaluation. Deflationary views predict that Hanks', King's, and Soames' substantive accounts will create spurious problems. I have shown that this prediction is borne out

by the facts, by discussing the Frege-Geach problem for Hank's act-of-predication account and Recanati's simulationist elaboration. I have suggested that the unity problems about propositions that these accounts aim to solve by ascribing them substantive natures should be dismissed, taking the unity facts concerning them as primitive. Related substantive explanations involving the representational vehicles to which propositions are ascribed will handle remaining concerns.

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Notes

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¹ See Moore (1999, 3). He convincingly argues that such pretheoretical notion is, as he puts it “individually vague”: different contexts involving different explanatory goals for talk of *sameness of content* or *what is said* make salient different individuating criteria. See also Grzankowski & Buchanan’s contribution to this volume. This is consistent with the deflationary view endorsed in this paper, see fn. 8 below.

² See King’s “What Role do Propositions Play in our Theories?”, in King et al. (2014), and McGrath, M. and Frank, D. (2018).

³ I am just suggesting that the explanation of the justification relation would thereby be easier, not altogether unproblematic.

⁴ Cf. Davidson’s (2005, 76-97) presentation of the early history of the debate.

⁵ Cf. Green (1999), Matthews (2007, 2011), Field (2016), Ball (2018).

⁶ Cf. King (2009), Schnieder (2010), Eklund (2019), and Collins (2018).

⁷ A bit melodramatically, Davidson says that, absent a substantive account, the “philosophy of language lacks its most important chapter ...; the philosophy of mind is missing a crucial first

step if it cannot describe the nature of judgment; and it is woeful if metaphysics cannot say how a substance is related to its attributes” (*ibid.*, 77). Deflationists dismiss the concern, like this: “Not every *account* is an *analysis*! A system that takes certain Moorean facts as primitive, as unanalysed, cannot be accused of failing to make a place for them. It neither shirks the compulsory question nor answers it by denial. It does give an account”, Lewis (1983, 352). Along such lines, Schnieder (2010, 300) writes this on the representation problem: “the truth-value aptness of a proposition is at least a good candidate for belonging to the fundamental essence of a thing. But if this is so, the only legitimate reply ... may consist not in a direct answer, but instead in a rejection of the question”.

⁸ Cf. Speaks’ “Propositions are Properties of Everything or Nothing”, in King, Soames, & Speaks (2014); Richard (2013); Sinhababu (2015); and Pautz (2016). Of course, ‘deflationary’ is a relative term; I mean my take on propositions to be deflationary exclusively in relation to the ambitions expressed by King and Davidson, which create the problems I am about to present. I don’t take the identification of propositions with properties of worlds or situations to be substantive in that relative sense – an ascription to them after all of a “hidden nature” –, because I assume an equally deflationary view of properties. Note that most current views on truth that count as deflationary agree nonetheless that truth is an “abundant” property (Lewis 1983). Such properties may be understood as explained by resemblance nominalism. Propositions might thus ultimately be equivalence classes of representational vehicles, as in some traditional deflationary views – cf. Grzankowski & Buchanan (2019) and their contribution to this volume, Field (2016) and Sainsbury (2018) for related views. As such properties, propositions are more or less fine-grained for different explanatory purposes, thus being “individually vague”, as Moore (1999) argues. What is essential is that they provide correctness conditions for the relevant states, how

they represent the world – which is what is needed for them to properly perform the core tasks in their job description (Sinhababu 2015).

⁹ Ostertag (2013, 519) reports that Stalnaker pointed this out. The properties that I will take propositions to correspond to the *states of affairs* that on Matthews’ (2007, 153) presentation of the measure-theoretic account are *representatives* of the attitudes.

¹⁰ Cf. Keller (2013) for the problems the contrasting view raises for substantivists.

¹¹ Cf. García-Carpintero (2006), Grzankowski (2015). Camp’s (2018) argument against this assumes her decision to “interpret propositionality in terms of functional structure” (*ibid.*, 21), something which I am arguing shouldn’t be granted. Even if the argument is valid given her assumption, from the perspective adopted here it merely reveals vehicle-level differences. García-Carpintero & Palmira (forthcoming) argue that the notion of *singular proposition* should also be explained on the deflationary perspective, in terms of properties of representational vehicles, as opposed to substantive commitments on features of propositions themselves.

¹² Cf. Richard (2013, 707-8, 716) and Field (2016).

¹³ Cf. Pickel (2015) for a clear elaboration of these concerns, the most obvious ones of a modal nature. See also Speaks’s “Representational Entities and Representational Facts” in King et al. (2014), Caplan *et al.* (2013), Caplan (2016).

¹⁴ I don’t mean ‘explanation’ in an epistemological sense, but in the objective, metaphysical sense of ‘because’ common in discussions of essence, ontological dependence, and grounding (cf. Audi 2012, Correia 2008, Rosen 2015).

¹⁵ Cf. Koslicki (2018, ch. 5) and Tahko & Lowe (2020) for discussion and further references. Both Koslicki and Tahko & Lowe show that the existential account of the distinction I assume in

the main text has problems, and they offer alternatives. The existential account is simple, and it suffices to make my points; but they could also be made with the alternative notions.

¹⁶ García-Carpintero (2019a) argues for the contingency of kinds defined by constitutive rules.

¹⁷ I understand that Hanks (2015, 3-4) endorse this here: “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.” He also says that “[p]ropositions are types of actions, and propositional attitude relations are tokening relations”, *ibid.*, 7. It is only when occurring together with acts of representation that propositions get truth-conditions: “The representational features of these acts are not borrowed from pre-existing propositions. They are generated in the performance of the acts themselves” (Hanks 2019, 1386).

¹⁸ Cf. Sainsbury’s (2018, 55-9) congenial discussion of cardinality worries about deflationary views on propositions. Remember also the point made on fn. 8 on the relativity of ‘deflationary’: the generic dependence of propositions on acts envisaged here may be deemed substantive enough, by some measure; the present point however is just that granting it is consistent with rejecting as unfounded the explanatory ambitions of Davidson, Hanks and King.

¹⁹ The problem is not restricted to conditionals. It also arises with disjunction, negation (Hom & Schwartz 2013, 19), the preajacent conditions (sometimes merely contextually implicit, Dowell 2012) in modals and the open sentences required to account for generality (Collins 2018, §6).

²⁰ There are theatrical examples entirely analogous to the one by Stock below; consider for instance Frayn’s *Copenhaguen*. Moreover, as Ohmann (1971, 18), Lewis (1978, 266), and

Alward (2009) suggest, the author of a literary fiction can be seen as an actor impersonating the explicit or implicit teller of the story, asserting its content.

²¹ Cf. García-Carpintero (2019b).

²² A commitment he owns, as he acknowledged to me in personal communication. Recanati (2019, 1414) is also unhappy with this aspect of Hanks's views.

²³ I am surprised by Green's (2018, 18) claim, "It has for decades been widely agreed among philosophers that there can be no intimate connection between any particular form of words (such as "x is good") and a pragmatic property (such as approving)". There is no such agreement on this if by 'intimate' we mean 'conventional', as the context of that remark suggests; see below in the main text. Glüer (2013, 344-5) briefly addresses the issue. She says that Davidson's arguments "are too intricate to fully unravel and to do justice here". She does discuss "two basic strands": (i) that conventional meaning should be ascribed to utterances of declarative sentences even when they occur in situations cancelling the conventionally indicated assertoric commitment; (ii) that no convention can guarantee the sincerity of the speaker. Both points are correct, but irrelevant to reject the conventionalist claim.

²⁴ Cf. García-Carpintero (2019b) for elaboration. Kölbel (2010, §7) also critically discusses Davidson's arguments. He considers the reply I am assuming (*ibid.*, 127). He ends up preferring an alternative one; I lack the space here to explain why I prefer my own.

²⁵ In discussion at the Donostia conference Hanks suggested that the regress might not be vicious. This, however, should be worked out; *prima facie* we have here one more of those problematic regresses that substantivism on the unity problems tends to generate.

²⁶ Matravers (1997, 79) calls this the *Report Model*: “in reading a novel, a reader makes-believe he is being given a report of actual events. In other words, he makes-believe the content of the novel is being reported to him as known fact by a narrator”.

²⁷ The points in this paragraph are developed at length in García-Carpintero (forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b).