

“Non-Doxastic Attitudes and Semantics of Natural Language” — description of the project for general public

While writing this grant application, I often use phrases such as “I want to...”, “I wonder whether...”, etc. These phrases express my attitudes towards various contents, e.g., the claim that I will write at least one article presenting the results of the project. Philosophers call these contents “propositional” and the attitudes directed at these contents “propositional attitudes”. Moreover, the above examples (“want”, “wonder” etc.) refer to such attitudes which do not involve a belief of the subject that the content of the attitude is true (in other words, the ascription, e.g., “John wants me to write at least one article” does not imply at all that John believes that I have already written at least one article). These attitudes are called “non-doxastic”. The purpose of the project is to develop a theory of non-doxastic attitude reports (i.e., sentences of the form “S wants p”, “S wonders whether p” etc.) In particular, our task will be to account — on the basis of the proposed theory — for the logical properties of non-doxastic attitude ascriptions.

A main problem for a semantic theory which concerns attitude ascriptions is that their truth-value can be affected by the transformations of the relative clause which should generally preserve the sense of this clause: a description of someone’s attitude can essentially change its meaning once we replace an expression with an equivalent or co-referential one. For example, the sentence:

(1) “Anne believes that Venus is Venus”,

may be true, while the sentence

(2) “Anne believes that the Evening Star is Venus”,

false, but the second one differs from the first sentence only with respect to the fact that one occurrence of “Venus” has been replaced by “the Evening Star”, and the two expressions actually refer to the same celestial body (i.e., are co-referential). The discussions on the indicated problem have been mainly focused on doxastic attitude ascriptions (i.e., the attitudes such as “believe”, “know”). Nonetheless, contemporary philosophical linguists have observed that non-doxastic attitude reports in general have a number of puzzling properties. Roughly speaking, the truth conditions of these reports change even when the modification of the complement clause sounds trivial. Let us consider an example:

(3) “John wants to lose honorably”.

The clauses “John lost honorably” and “John lost and he did it honorably” are undoubtedly equivalent (in a particular context). However, the sentence which is the result of a substitution of the first clause with the second one in (3), that is, the sentence:

(4) “John wants to lose and do it honorably”

is clearly not equivalent to the original desire report (3). The second ascription clearly implies that John would like to lose, among other things, but the first sentence has no such implication.

The reason for taking up the project is to provide a solution to the indicated problem of substitutions in non-doxastic attitude ascriptions and to elaborate a possibly uniform account of them, which has been absent in the philosophical literature.

In the project, we will analyze inferences which operate non-doxastic attitude verbs, in order to investigate their logical, semantic and pragmatic properties. Our methods will be theoretical, as well as empirical, involving the study on linguistic intuition of ordinary users of language. The final part of the project will be a construction of a semantic theory of non-doxastic attitude ascriptions, with using tools of contemporary logic and formal linguistics.