Propositions and States-of-Affairs – a functional-cognitive approach

Kasper Boye, Dept. of Scandinavian Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen

The distinction between Propositions and States-of-Affairs has received relatively little attention in functional and cognitive linguistics. It plays a major role only in Functional Grammar (e.g. Dik 1997) and Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008), and these frameworks adopt a traditional denotational conception of it as a distinction between types of denotable entities: Propositions are defined as third-order entities that can be said to have a truth-value, while States-of-Affairs are second-order entities that can be said to occur or take place (e.g. Dik & Hengeveld 1991: 233; cf. Lyons 1977: 443-445). Cognitive Grammar proposes a radically different representational (as opposed to denotational) conception of Propositions, which it deals with in terms of epistemic grounding, but largely ignores the contrast with States-of-Affairs (e.g. Langacker 1991: 551, but see Achard 2002).

This paper first outlines a new functional-cognitive theory of the distinction, which is based on Cognitive Grammar, but centered on the notion of reference (in the sense of Lyons 1977: 1977-1997). Both Propositions and States-of-Affairs are defined as invoking Langackerian "processes" (i.e. sequentially scanned conceptual relationships). However, they differ in that only Propositions are referring in the sense that they stipulate or predicate a "world" referent of the mental representation constituted by the Langackerian process. In other words, Propositions amount to States-of-Affairs plus referring status.

Subsequently, the paper discusses a number of arguments in support of this theory:

1. The theory explicitly captures the hypothesis that Propositions are conceptually more complex than States-of-affairs. This hypothesis is supported by crosslinguistic tendencies pertaining to the ordering and scope properties of Proposition- and State-of-Affairs-modifying elements (Boye 2010a; Boye 2012: Ch. 4), and may be seen as iconically reflected in the tendency for propositional clauses to be morphosyntactically more complex than State-of-Affairs designating clauses (Boye 2010b).
2. The theory entails a compositional analysis of Propositions, including a precise definition of what it means to have a truth-value.
3. The theory makes possible a precise description of why only Propositions and not States-of-Affairs allow of epistemic modification.
4. The theory entails an account of an asymmetric relation between direct and indirect speech acts: assertions expressed by declaratives and polar questions expressed by interrogatives can be used to convey directives (or commands) as indirect speech acts, but directives expressed by imperatives cannot be used to convey assertions or polar questions as indirect speech acts.

The argumentation draws on crosslinguistic studies of 1) modifier ordering, 2) perception-verb complementation, and 3) utterance-verb complementation.

References

Achard, Michel. 2002. The meaning and distribution of French mood inflections, in F Brisard (ed.), *Grounding: The epistemic footing of deixis and reference,* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 197-249.

Boye, K. 2010a. Evidence for what? Evidentiality and scope. *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung* 63.4, 290-307.

Boye, K. 2010b. Reference and clausal perception-verb complements. *Linguistics* 48.2, 391-430.

Boye, K. 2012. *Epistemic meaning: A crosslinguistic and functional-cognitive study*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Dik, S.C. 1997. *The theory of Functional Grammar, Part 1: The structure of the clause* (ed. K. Hengeveld). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Dik, S.C. & K. Hengeveld. 1991. The hierarchical structure of the clause and the typology of perception-verb complements, *Linguistics* 29, 231-259.

Hengeveld, K. & J. Lachlan Mackenzie. 2008. *Functional Discourse Grammar: A typologically-based theory of language structure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Langacker, R.W. 1991. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, Vol. 2: Descriptive application*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lyons, J. 1977. *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.