

Twardowskian Semantics for Performative Utterances

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Abstract. Works of Twardowski in the early 20th century contain an outline of a general semantic framework for natural languages. This framework, proposed within Twardowski’s theory of actions and ‘products,’ provides a drastic alternative to Frege’s semantic framework based on the notion of proposition (*Gedanke* in Frege). The latter has to a great extent shaped the following development of logical semantics. However, some recent works state that Twardowski’s theory allows to dissolve a number of problems characteristic of proposition-based semantics. In this paper, I show that it also provides a ground for a certain reconsideration of speech act theory. Since speech act theory was suggested by Austin as a fundamental alternative to standard proposition-oriented view on language, its emergence in a sense has divided philosophy of language into barely connected realms. The turn to Twardowskian semantics arguably allows to develop a more consistent understanding of how language works. DOI: 10.52119/LPHS.2024.69.77.011.

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Contemporary semantics is to a great extent driven by the notion of proposition, which typically presupposes the abstract, inter-agentive (or rather non-agentive) and cross-temporal (or even a-temporal) nature of the semantic matter of sentences. The Frege’s conception of *thought* (*Gedanke*) is a radical instance of this stance, claiming that thoughts, i.e. senses of sentences, aren’t created but revealed by humans [1].

The conception of Twardowski [2] is directed oppositely. Being intended *prima facie* to disambiguation of terms—e.g. distinguishing *thought* as an *act* and as a *product* (of that act)—it includes an ontological thesis quite contrastive to the one mentioned above: there are no eternal thoughts, and any thought in the hypostatic sense, as an object, is a ‘product’ of a thought as an act (i.e. of some thinking).

Twardowski provides a sketch of a general semantic theory, which in some respects reminds the Fregean one, while in others is radically contrasting to the latter. The common feature is that both theories may be called bicomponent: Twardowski suggests the distinction between *significance* and *denotation*, to some extent similar to the Fregean distinction between sense and denotation. The Twardowskian notion of denotation is, apparently, analogous or close to the Fregean one. However, by significance he means something completely different than the Fregean ‘sense,’ due to the above mentioned difference in their views. For Frege, ‘senses’ are eternal and abstract (universal) entities. For Twardowski, what signifies are psychic products (of psychic acts)—entities which are ephemeral, non-enduring and quite concrete. The latter means that there is no significance (i.e. a thought or some other psychic product) shared by different agents (or maybe even by one and the same agent at different times). The conception of ‘the same’ significance of linguistic expressions for different persons, according to Twardowski, rests on artificial abstraction. Such abstractions are possible because, along with psychic products, all of which are not enduring, there are also two other categories of products which may endure. The latter are psychophysical products (intended products of physical acts) and physical products (unintended products of physical acts). A sentence is a psychophysical product, expressing some psychic product due to some agent’s intention and inducing similar psychic products in other agents, and that similar psychic products are known as allegedly ‘the same,’ see [2, §39]. (Twardowski evades the question about sameness of psychophysical products, just claiming that its rejection could only make his position stronger.)

A modern reception of the Twardowskian framework is proposed by F. Moltmann [3], where the category of ‘attitudinal objects’ is understood closely to the Twardowskian category of psychic products and accompanied with the category of ‘modal objects.’ Attitudinal objects include judgments, claims, beliefs, decisions, desires, fears, intentions, promises and requests, while modal objects include needs, obligations, permissions, offers and abilities. They are regarded to be ‘concrete, agent-dependent entities that come with truth or satisfaction conditions as well as a part structure’, playing a very important role in our mental activity and communication, see [3]. This account, though rejecting the standard propositional semantics with its notion of propositions as abstract and, so to say, completely objective entities, nevertheless leaves some room for objecthood of ‘propositional’ content and is suitable to keep the traditional semantic notions of truth and satisfaction. As such, it contrasts with some radical alternatives to propositional semantics, e.g. in [4] and [5], which are intended to replace all ‘propositional’ content just with psychic acts.

Below, I show that the notion of attitudinal objects allows to approach better certain problems that are discussed within the framework of speech act theory.

One of the central claims of speech act theory is that some sentences in some speech acts are used not for description of current realities but for establishing of new realities, i.e. they are used with *performative force*. E.g. by saying ‘I pronounce that you’re married’ or ‘I promise that she will agree’ one does not (only) indicate something happening but makes it happen (however, only provided that the one has such a power).

The discussion on performativity resulted in a range of positions towards this topic. One margin (*PT1*) is the stance of the earlier Austin, according to which performative utterances are (1) actions themselves and (2) are not assertive, thus cannot be evaluated as true or false, but only as felicitous or infelicitous, see [6]. There are similar views in the recent literature, e.g. [7]. An argument against this position is that it leads to an inconsistent treatment of linguistic phenomena. E.g. it provokes us to believe that some verbs in different persons are apt for different illocutionary acts (e.g. ‘I promise *smth*’ vs. ‘You promise *smth*’) while other verbs are on a par in that respect (e.g. ‘I see *smth*’ vs. ‘You see *smth*’), cf. [8, p. 246].

Another option (*PT2*) is that utterances regarded as performatives (1) are actions themselves (not only actions in that weak and trivial sense in which any word usage is an action, but actions performing what is meant as being performed by the performative) and (2) are assertive, cf. [8].

The other margin (*PT3*) of the range is the view that utterances regarded as performatives (1) are not actions themselves (in the sense that they do not perform by themselves what is meant as being performed by the performative) and (2) are assertive, cf. [9].

In my opinion, *PT1* is unsatisfactory due to the inconsistency mentioned above. As for *PT2* and *PT3*, my thesis is that turning to Twardowskian semantics helps much to clarify the topic and to find a solution dissolving the difficulties that have led to the variety (or indeterminacy) of the positions. Within the present approach, a *promise* is an *attitudinal object* of a certain kind, produced by a corresponding *act of promising*. The locution ‘I promise’ denotes the act performed by the speaker (which can be rendered with some version of Davidsonian semantics), while the *that*-clause specifies the content of the promise as an attitudinal object. Different uses of the word *promise* are defined by this semantics and consistent. The act of promising itself is not in any sense done by the utterance of the promise, but is rather what Twardowski called a psychophysical act, i.e. a psychic act in a certain way intentionally connected with a (psycho)physical product, which is the utterance. The utterance can be evaluated as true or false, and also as sincere or insincere. For promises, an utterance is true exactly in those cases in which it is sincere, i.e. there are corresponding psychic action and

attitudinal object.

The very existence of the notion of sincerity is an evidence that there are attitudinal objects as psychic correlates of such utterances. Or at least that natural language ontology is bound to such picture of reality, as stated in [3]. As for Austin, he explicitly declines the traditional worldview: "...it's very easy to think that the utterance is simply the outward... sign of... inward spiritual act of promising, and this view is certainly been expressed in many classic places. (...) There is the case of Euripides' Hippolytus, who said 'My tongue swore to, but my heart did not' (...) Now it is clear from... example that, if we slip into thinking that such utterances are reports, true or false... we open a loophole to perjurers and welschers and bigamists" [6, p. 223]. Here, Austin provides primarily ethical reasons for his stance. However, even if one regards ethical motivation as significant for the matter discussed, Austin's argument is far from being decisive because theory of performative utterances opens loopholes for perjurers of its own kind, such as those who say 'I love you' as a performative, without the feeling.

The current proposal stays close to the one of Bach & Harnish, who see promising utterances to be communicating of a specific attitude, thus regarding them as typical assertions [10, p. 95]. An advantage of addressing here Twardowskian semantics of attitudinal objects is that it allows to analyse better the semantic structure of such utterances. At the level of reference, it allows to distinguish a psychic act and its content ('product'), which is necessary due to the content-based causality, as shown in [3]. It also allows to distinguish the promising utterance as a psychophysical act, in terms of Twardowski, and the psychic act of promising, which may help to obtain conceptual clarity.

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