

## **Kinds of Proposition/Statement**

Propositions or statements make claims about the world that can be either true or false. Propositions can be distinguished either syntactically (by their syntax, structural form) or semantically (by their content, meaning).

### **1) Syntactic Differences:**

#### **Simple/atomic vs. complex/compound statements:**

Simple, or atomic (i.e., indivisible), statements cannot be divided into parts that are themselves statements, whereas complex, or compound, statements have parts that are themselves statements. E.g.: the simple statement: it is raining outside right now, vs. the compound statement: it is raining outside right now and I forgot my umbrella.

[Note that McLaughlin (p. 21) defines a statement as the expression of a single idea or concept, that is, as a simple statement. The trouble with this definition is that it entails that compound statements are not statements. It is better to think of statements as making claims about the world that can either be true or false, and that there can be one or several such claims in a statement or proposition.]

#### **Some Different Types of Complex/Compound Statement:**

- a) **Disjunction:** a compound statement that asserts that at least one of its sub-claims is the case: George or Sally will come to the party. Given the Law of Excluded Middle, every disjunction of the logical form  $P$  or not  $P$  is logically true.
- b) **Conjunction:** a compound statement that asserts both of its sub-claims: George and Sally will come to the party. Given the Law of Non-contradiction, every conjunction of the logical form  $P$  and not  $P$  is logically false.
- c) **Hypothetical/Conditional statements:** Compound propositions of the logical form, If ..., then ..., e.g., If wine is served at the party, then George will attend.

### **2) Semantic Differences:**

#### **Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Statements:**

Descriptive statements describe some part of the world, past, present or future, that is, they claim that the world is, was, or will be a certain way. Prescriptive statements state what ought to be the case. Hence, the prescriptive claim that something ought to be the case does not necessarily also claim that in fact that is the case.

#### **Some Different Types of Descriptive Statement:**

- a) **Categorical:** Inclusion or exclusion of one set of things in relation to another set of things, either in whole or in part. They have a quantity (either universal or particular) and a quality (either affirmative or negative).
- b) **Modal (mode of existence):**  
Necessary (cannot be otherwise) vs. Contingent (can be otherwise).  
Possible (can be the case) vs. Impossible (cannot be the case).

- c) Existential (something is actually the case) vs. Hypothetical/Conditional statements (make no claim that something is actually the case). The latter include counterfactual statements (what would be the case if some non-actual possibility were actualized, e.g., if ostriches had bigger wings and lighter bodies, they could fly).
- d) Explanatory statements: state the explanatory factors, reasons, or causes, which explain why something is the case.
- e) Definitions: nominal vs. real.
- f) Rhetorical Questions: the answer (i.e., a statement) is implied by the question.

**Prescriptive Statements:**

Prescriptive statements typically presuppose a standard of conduct relevant to the conduct or situation in question. Such standards are sometimes called ‘norms’, and so prescriptive statements are also called **normative** statements. (‘Norm’ here refers to a standard of conduct that one ought to follow, not a statistical average or mean.) Prescriptive norms often take the form of **rules**, e.g., do not steal other people’s property, but this is not always the case. For example, the moral norm: be nice to other people, does not specify which forms of conduct count as being nice to other people; rules, on the other hand, typically command or forbid a specific form of conduct.

**Evaluative statements** express a value judgement, that is, they ascribe a value to something. Normative statement (a standard of conduct or performance) typically entail such evaluations. Non-evaluative statements make no value judgement.