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Tensed propositions in W. Ockham’s logic

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This article presents the reconstruction of W. Ockham’s approach to the analysis of truth conditions of tensed propositions in order to clarify Ockham’s view and to present it in a systematic way. The article focuses on the chapter seven of the second book and chapter seventy two of the first book of the treatise *Summa Logicae*. One of the points that makes the analysis of Ockham’s theory of tensed and modal propositions significant is the fact that he rejected the standard scholastic tool of the analysis of modal and tensed propositions — ampliation (ampliatio). Therefore, Ockham had to create his own theory that was based on his general ideas of supposition and predication that were primarily described by him in terms of the present tense. The main aim of this article is to examine why Ockham doesn’t use traditional tool for analysis of the truth-conditions in propositions about Future and Past. In the beginning of the article there is a textual reconstruction of the chapter seven, then there is an examination of the role of subject term and predication rules in this kind of propositions. Subsequently there is a general chart of the analysis of truth conditions in tensed propositions in Ockham’s view. In the article author claims that the ground of the rejection were Ockham’s ontological interests which were presented in his debate with W. Burley. Instead of traditional disjunction Ockham suggests detachment of the two senses of proposition. This idea leads to semantic controversy. Reference to the objects in past and future cannot be reduced to the reference to objects in present. Nominalism and mental language theory leads him to these semantic decisions.

*Keywords*: ampliatio, suppositio, truth, medieval logic

The classical approach to studying truth conditions of tensed propositions\(^1\) in terminist logic of the 13th–14th centuries was to use the

\(^1\)In this article, the terms “proposition” and “propositio” will be used synonymously because of a specific status of the scholastic “propositio”, which has both the meaning as a grammatic form and the status of a logical assertion at the same time.
“ampliatio” tool — an approach that is a variety of the classic proposition analysis tool — “suppositio” that originated in the 12th century. For the nominalist Ockham, supposition is one of the main subjects of interest in his semantic treatises as well as an approach that he actively uses, whereas he does not mention ampliatio in his treatises.

The aim of this article is to find out why Ockham does not use this analysis tool for truth conditions of propositions about the past and the future, while the hypothesis of the article is the assumption that the foundation was formed by his ontological interests, which in particular were expressed in his polemics with the realist W. Burleigh.

The main source, on which this article is based, is chapter 7 of the second book of the scholar William of Ockham’s Summa Logicae — it takes up only a few pages but, as noted by the famous expert on medieval logic Calvin Normore, it is dark and unclear and is difficult to interpret. In addition to chapter 7 of the second book, Ockham also describes the approach we are considering in the polemical chapter 72 of the first book of the Summa Logicae (it is devoted to objections of Ockham’s opponents on the issue of how to define supposition and which supposition rules should be established).

Therefore, the structure of this article is conditioned by two main problems — to reconstruct Ockham’s approach to the analysis of tensed propositions and to suggest reading chapter seven in order to clarify the scholastic philosopher’s views.

1. Structure of chapter 7

Chapter seven can be briefly schematized as follows:

1. General rule R1 for the supposition of a subject term in tensed propositions (Lines 1–14)

   Example 1
   “A white thing was Socrates”
   Example 2
   “The being that creates was from eternity God”
   Example 3
   “A boy will be an old man”

Ockham argues that these examples are similar and illustrates one rule. 

²The chapter’s layout performs the function of clarifying the main chapter’s structure and body, therefore a few lines were omitted here.
2. The difference between propositions about the present and propositions about the past or the future

*(Lines 31–49)*

**General rule R2 of predication in propositions about the past and the future**

The difference between functions of a subject and a predicate in propositions about the past or the future

*(Lines 49–63)*

3. Final example³

“The being that creates is always God”

As is clear from the outline suggested here, Ockham’s analysis includes several rules and examples, but does not represent a systematically developed concept. One can assume that Ockham to a greater extent is trying to solve problems that may be caused by this type of proposition, as well as respond to possible objections, rather than create a full-fledged theory⁴.

In other words, this chapter is of a polemical nature, though not as obvious as chapter 72 *SL1*; the latter is directly called “responses to objections”, among which Ockhna’s first counter-argument pertains precisely to propositions about the future and the past as well as the rules of predication in propositions of this type⁵.

after he completed his analysis of various instances of universal, single, particular and uncertain propositions in the second book Summa Logicae devoted to the truth conditions of various propositions and their conversion [19].

Propositions about the future and the past (*de praeterito et de future*) differ from present time propositions in that they have a modified link, i.e. a verb used not in the present but in the past or the future tense. Therefore, the standard link “is” (“est”) is modified on account of time, for example, “was” or “will be” (*fuit* or *erit*).

³The lines are marked based on Ockham’s critical edition [19]. The names of the rules and the outline are mine.

⁴This assumption is validated by the fact that Ockham is clearly using examples referring to W. Burleigh’s approach, for example, “A boy will be an old man”.

⁵As part of this essay we shall also consider chapter 72 *SL1*, however only within the boundaries necessary to clarify the approach we are studying.
2. **Subject term in tensed propositions**

At the beginning of chapter 7, Ockham states that one should distinguish between propositions with three types of subject terms (*est distinguenda*) dependent on how the subject term can be suppositd to:

1. for a substance existing in the present time.

2. for a substance that existed in the past or the one that will exist in the future.

For propositions about the past, a subject term may supposit either *pro eo quod est* or *pro eo quod fuit* (for what is, or for what was).

Similarly, in the case of propositions about the future: a subject term may supposit either *pro eo quod est* or *pro eo quod erit* (for what is, or for what will be).

The possibility to double supposit a subject term in propositions of this type is conveyed through the use of the expression “one should distinguish” (conveyed through the form est *distinguenda*). This creates a situation of ambiguity, equivocation — this proposition can be understood in two ways.

Prepositions that have an ambiguity are ones in which subject terms are common terms (*terminus communis*), for example, a man, demonstrative pronouns with a common term (*pronomen demonstrativum cum termino communi*), for example, “this man”, or a discrete term — a term that is referring to a single thing (*terminus discretus*).

Therefore, a specific characteristic of propositions about the past and the future is that propositions with the above types of subject terms always include ambiguity in its supposition.

However, the situation is different with regards to the supposition of a predicate term. In the beginning of the chapter Ockham does not yet suggest a specific example to illustrate the rules for the supposition of subject, he will clarify it later as part of the description of his general approach.

Nonetheless, it would make sense to dwell on this issue more extensively.

Let us consider an example:

**A white thing was white yesterday.**
Proceeding from the presence of equivocation in propositions about the past, there are two possibilities to analyze this proposition:

1. An object **that was white** was white yesterday.

2. An object **that is white** was white yesterday.

If the object is no longer white but is, for instance, red, proposition (2) would be false (because there is no white object anymore), while proposition (1) would be true. It turns out that equivocation is possible because a common term in Ockham’s semantics discretely signifies a certain range of objects, so it can refer them to both the past and the present object.

The same outline of analysis is applicable in the event that a subject term is a demonstrative pronoun with a common term or a discrete term that represents a complex (composite) object. To summarize this in the simplest way while diverging from authentic Ockham vocabulary, in the event that the types of terms listed above are subject terms, they can refer to either an object in the present, or the past, or the future (depending on the type of proposition) by its very nature: we simply do not know what is meant, for example, by the term “this man”: “this is a man” or “this was a man”.

It is therefore clear that in the event that a subject term is a proper noun or a demonstrative pronoun, there is no ambiguity of this kind because grammatically “this” or “Socrates” is referring to a specific single thing.

One can object that a demonstrative pronoun with a common term also refers to a singleton. And really, what does the term “this man” refer to? Clearly, it refers to a specific individual. However, the term “this man” differs grammatically; it can be understood as “this is the man” or “this was the man”, which creates ambiguity.

In support of this interpretation one can give an excerpt from chapter 72 SL: “nonetheless, one should understand that this significant distinction has nothing to do with the predicate, just the subject. So,

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6For example, any scholastic ‘Sortes’ or ‘hoc’ — “Socrates” or “this”.

7M. McCord Adams believes that in propositions about the future and the past there is always ambiguity, because in all cases a subject term supposits for an object in the present, or for an object in the past or the future. See [9].
it makes no sense to draw a distinction in the case of the following two propositions: ‘Socrates was white’ or ‘Socrates can be white’” [19, p. 217].

The meaning of this citation primarily affects neither functions nor characteristics of the subject, but mainly has to do with the predicate, i.e., in other words, Ockham says here that equivocation occurs for the subject term but never has to do with the predicate.

**General rule R1 for the supposition of a subject term in tensed propositions.**

Let us consider general rule 1 formulated by Ockham.

In any case, if a proposition is affirmative, then it is necessary that the predicate in its own form would be truly predicated – by virtue of a verb in the corresponding tense – to what the subject is suppositing. Therefore, it is necessary that the preposition, in which the predicate is predicated to a pronoun, referring precisely to what the subject is suppositing, would be true at some point in time \( t \), or will be true at some point in time \( t \) [19, p. 217].

**General rule 1** can be split into two parts.

First of all, it is necessary that the predicate is predicated to what the subject is suppositing. This can be expressed in a different way: it is necessary that the subject and the predicate supposit the same object. As mentioned above, this is a basic rule for establishing the truth condition for all types of affirmative propositions in Ockham’s logic.

Ockham also describes those requirements that are distinctive specifically for propositions about the future and the past.

A predicate in propositions of this type must be predicated ‘*vere per tale verbum*’ in its own form. What does this mean?

According to Ockham, a predicate is naming its form (appelatio). Therefore, in the case of a predicate we are not talking about equivocation in suppositing the predicate term (a predicate is always dependent on the copula), i.e. the form is accurate (it raises no doubt) due to the use of a verb in its corresponding tense. The second part of **rule 1** describes a requirement for propositions, which is central to this study. This requirement can be schematically expressed as follows:

**It is necessary that**

“This” is “a predicate” was (will be) true at the time \( t \) [19, p. 217].
To what the subject is suppositing

Ockham suggests forming a proposition with a demonstrative pronoun (for example, “this” or “that”, ’hoc’ in the original Latin) as a subject term and a predicate from the initial proposition. For example, if the initial proposition was “The pale horse was Bucephalus”, then the rule requires that the proposition “This is Bucephalus” be formed, where Bucephalus is a predicate of both the initial proposition and the additionally formed one.

In this case the following conditions must be met:

1. This formed proposition was or (will be) true at the time $t$.
2. The subject term of this proposition refers to the same object that the subject is suppositing. “This is Bucephalus” was true at time $t$, if the subject term “this” refers to the same object that the subject term of the initial proposition is suppositing (“the pale horse” in our case).

Let us consider example 1

“The white thing was Socrates” (Album fuit Sortes)

Let this proposition be true, writes Ockham.

For this proposition to be true, it is not necessary that the proposition ‘Album est Sortes’ (“The white thing is Socrates”) was true at some time $t$. It is necessary that the proposition “This is Socrates” was true at some time $t$, and the demonstrative pronoun “this” would refer to some object, which is being suppositioed by the subject of the initial proposition. Let us assume, Ockham says, that Socrates was white for first. Will the proposition we are considering be true? “Yes”, Ockham gives a positive answer to this question, this proposition will be true. This might seem strange, because this proposition is a proposition in the past tense due to the presence of the copula ‘fuit’ (“was”), however, remembering the equivocation rule for suppositing the subject being a common term, we realise that there are no contradictions here and nothing prevents it from

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8 As we recall from the rules above, this utterance can be described in two ways because the subject “white object” is a common term. First of all, the subject term is suppositing an object, which “is some object”; secondly, the subject is suppositing for some object, which “was some object”.
being true — the subject is suppositing an object that exists in the present time.

Therefore, Socrates existed prior to the time $t$, which had a certain color (for example, black) but was not white. Therefore the proposition “This is Socrates” was true. According to rule 1, “this” must refer to what the initial proposition subject is suppositing. And since the initial proposition subject “a white thing” is suppositing Socrates, then the proposition is true.

Ockham gives two more examples that he considers similar to the first one and illustrating rule 1:

- “The being that creates was from eternity God”
- “A boy will be an old man”

The second example turns out to be largely dependent on theological meaning and, in my opinion, because of this stands out from a number of others; therefore let us consider example 3.

Let us consider example 3 — “A boy will be an old man” (Puer erit senex)

This proposition, according to Ockham, is true and can be analyzed according to the outline suggested above. The proposition “This is an old man” will be true, while “this” refers to who the boy is now. The requirements are met, therefore the proposition is true.

Examples 1 and 3, according to the scholastic, are similar. We can rephrase example 3 as follows: for some given $x$: $x$ is a boy now and $x$ will be an old man. In essence, this is the outline that Ockham wants to suggest when describing truth conditions for these propositions. Even without regard for the fact that example 1 illustrates an analysis outline for truth conditions of propositions about the past, while example 3 illustrates the same about the future (according to Ockham, the analysis is constructed in the same way), we understand that it is hardly possible to say that they are similar. Why are they similar in the scholastic’s opinion?

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9We shall discuss this below.

10One of the reasons that Ockham builds the truth condition analysis for propositions about the past and the future in the same way, as I see it, is that in a natural language the constructions are similar. The remaining reasons are theological and physical and are related to understanding the notion ‘potentia’.
The reason here is quite simple: Ockham argues against the “naive notion”\textsuperscript{11}, according to which truth conditions of tensed propositions can be described through the requirement that some proposition in the present tense (for example, “the white thing is Socrates”) was (or will be) true at time \( t \). Therefore, the proposition “a boy is an old man” will not be true at time \( t \), because someone cannot be a boy and an old man at the same time. And the proposition “The white object is Socrates” was not true at some time \( t \) before, because Socrates turned white only now for the first time, and prior to this he was distinguished by some other color.

3. Predication in propositions about the past and the future

After we have analyzed the first main rule to do with establishing truth conditions in propositions about the future and the past, we should move on to considering the second one\textsuperscript{12}. This is aimed at explaining what is necessary for predication in propositions about the future and the past, and what makes it different from predication in propositions about the present.

Rule 2

As Ockham notes, in a proposition about the past it is not enough for the predicate to be truly predicated to what the subject is suppositing, but it is necessary for it to be predicated in a special way that is implied by this proposition. What does this mean? In the scholastic’s opinion, propositions about the past and the future differ from propositions about the present in that in the latter the predicate refers to objects in the same way as the subject, while this is not so for propositions about the past and the future: “the predicate does not simply refer to the objects to which \textit{it is truly predicated}, because it is under the impact (influence) of modified copula” [19, 270]. To clarify what was meant and why it is so important for Ockham to explain the possibility of predication in the propositions we are studying, it is necessary to turn to chapter 72 \textit{SL1}.

It should be explained beforehand why Ockham speaks about predication in this passage. In chapter 63 \textit{SL1} “About supposition” the main condition for the possibility of term supposition is as follows: “a

\textsuperscript{11}This wording belongs to P. Øhrstrøm [21].

\textsuperscript{12}It should be clarified again that the suggested layout for dividing into rules, as well as their titles, is absent from the text and is my proposal.
term must be truly predicated to an object” [19, p. 186]. The definition of predication in the Ockham’s theory remains unclear: It is absent from SL in principle. According to Gordon Leff, “unlike Porphyry who did not separate predication and signification and thereby neo-platonized the Aristotelian category system, Ockham made predication dependant on signification” [8, p. 149]. However, the problem in Ockham’s teachings is that supposition is made dependent on predication, thus, as noted by M. McCord Adams, there is a vicious circle here [9, p. 402].

One way or another, according to Ockham, the main truth condition of any proposition is that “the predicate must be truly predicated to what the subject supposits” [19, p. 216].

But what shall we do with propositions about the future and the past? In chapter 72 SL2 Ockham responds to a question-objection, which can be briefly represented as follows: how is the supposition of terms possible in propositions of this type if for the proposition “Socrates was a man” the predicate “a man” must be truly predicated to Socrates and Socrates does not exist?

Ockham’s response can be reduced to two main points:

1. A term can supposit an object that was or will be its significate, only through using a verb in the past or the future tense, “a predicate must be in its own form”.

2. A term can supposit personally not only for objects that are its significate but also for objects that were, will be or could be its significate [19, p. 216] (this possibility is postulated by Ockham through an introduction of definition for signification “in broad terms” [1]).

Therefore, the second point is a vicious circle: in modal and tensed propositions, terms supposit personally, the personal supposition is identified through an indication that the terms have been “taken significatively”; for this purpose a broad definition of signification is introduced (earlier), which makes signification possible for future, past and possible substances [1, p. 14]. A term cannot be truly predicated to an object that exists in the past or the future without the presence of a corresponding verb, for example, by means of a verb in the present tense.

Thus, the preposition “Socrates is a man” is not a true proposition in the situation when Socrates does not exist. Through a copula in the
corresponding tense and the presence of a certain “predicate’s own form”, predication is changed: it is no longer a present tense predication. In other words, a proposition in which the predicate (in its own form) is predicated to what the subject is suppositing had to be true one day. This is the same for propositions about the future [19, p. 216].

In general, Ockham’s approach can be characterized in the following way: the scholastic is using truth conditions analysis layout that he already suggested for present tense propositions to analyze propositions about the future and the past. However, two questions arise:

1. Would it be correct to say that the truth of propositions about the past is equivalent to the past truth of the corresponding proposition (proposition) in the present tense (the same relates to the future)\(^\text{13}\)?

2. Is the proposed layout exhausted by reduction to the truth condition layout for propositions about the present? What is the peculiarity of Ockham’s approach compared to ampliatio?

In the context of the questions asked, another question will arise about ontological commitments that Ockham imposes on himself. In order to present answers logically and to once again summarize the specifics of Ockham’s approach, let us consider the notion “ampliatio” in more detail.

An expanded supposition of a term in tensed and modal propositions beyond the boundaries of those objects that exist in the present tense for the specific utterance, i.e. for possible, future or past objects\(^\text{14}\) is called ampliation. It is through the use of ampliatio that the true meaning of a proposition was established, and it was thereby understood as a basic tool for analyzing truth conditions. We can find this term used by all authors of terminist logic in the age of high scholastics (12–15th centuries): Petrus Hispanus, Albertus de Saxonia, Buridan, Burleigh, etc., adhered to both the positions of realism and the positions of nominalism; however, it cannot be found in Ockham’s writings. This does not mean that Ockham does not use it, some scholars talk about the use of the ampliatio tool by Ockham, although he does not call it that directly [20].

As noted by E. Moody, “ampliation of a subject term does not affect the supposition of objects by the subject term that exist in the present

\(^{13}\)This point of view is upheld by Fredosso, see [5].

\(^{14}\)I am using the term “object” here; however it must be said that it is meant in the sense of a medieval “res”.
tense; an expansion occurs by way of logical addition, i.e. otherwise it could be expressed through disjunction” [14]. Let us consider the ampliatio rules proposed by W. Burleigh, as Burleigh is one of Ockham’s most serious opponents, with whom the scholastic engages in polemics explicitly or implicitly all the time.

In the Burleigh’s treatise “De Puritate Artis Logicae” we find the following ampliatio rule:

1. A common term correlating with a non-ampliating verb about the present in a proposition represents present time objects only.

2. A common term standing with a past tense verb in a proposition can equally represent both objects of the present tense and the past.

3. A common term standing with a future tense verb in a proposition can equally represent both objects of the present tense and the future o [4].

What are the specifics of Ockham’s approach? Can we say that it differs from the classical one? On the one hand, Ockham traditionally recognizes that a subject term (of the types listed above) in propositions under consideration can supposit either an object existing in the present or an object existing in the past (or the future) [19, 269]. On the other hand, Ockham says that in the case of the supposition of a subject term, there is equivocation, i.e. ambiguity, and two possible readings — meanings — occur.

It seems to be fruitful to use formalization suggested by S. Reed and G. Priest in the language of propositional tense logic [21, p. 277–278], because it expressively shows what makes Ockham’s approach different from standard disjunction. However, formalization here does not relay important points related to the fact that Ockham uses specifically present tense propositions (i.e. present tense predication) with demonstrative pronouns for analysis in the context of any reading.

According to S. Read and G. Priest, the traditional approach to the understanding of ampliatio can be expressed as follows:

$$\exists x (Ax & PBx) \lor \exists x (PAx & PBx).$$

Scholars show that the traditional approach to ampliatio represents a disjunction: and indeed, one can see that in Burleigh’s text a term supposition does not lead to identifying two meanings of the proposition.
According to them, Ockham’s approach can be represented like this:

\[ \exists x \ (PAx \land PBx), \]

\[ \exists x \ (Ax \land PBx). \]

The specifics of Ockham’s approach is the presence of two readings: tensed propositions with the subject terms listed above should be distinguished (est distinguenda) in accordance with the two meanings; a proposition taken in one of the meanings may prove to be false, while a proposition taking another meaning may be true. Ockham does not name these meanings at all; however, what is interesting is that he carries out truth condition analysis of modal propositions in a similar way. He also notes that they should be distinguished (est distinguenda) in accordance with the two meanings — sensu diviso and sensu composito. It is difficult to contract these meanings identified in modal and tensed propositions, because the second ones have a modal term, which segregates them into a fundamentally different type of propositions.

However, Ockham uses a similar set of tools in both types of propositions: he suggests forming simple single present tense propositions de inesse. In my opinion, this move, as well as the distinction between two meanings, are necessary for Ockham in order to accurately define and explain predication in modal and tensed propositions. According to Ockham, “a term must be truly predicated to an object” [19, p. 215]. However, how can it be truly predicated to an object if it does not exist? In order to explain this point, Ockham suggests two theses: a thesis about a broad understanding of signification and a thesis about predication in propositions that have past or future validity (truth).

One can assume that the latter statement, as well as general rule 1 of analyzing truth conditions, gave Fredosso the basis to assert that the truth condition analysis for propositions about the future and the past is carried out at the level of propositions — through past and future validity (truth) of propositions about the past [5].

Indeed, Ockham suggests forming a proposition “This is (a predicate)”, which was/will be true at the time t. According to Fredosso, this move allows one to assert that Ockham does not allow the existence of past, future and possible objects into his system because he does not describe the supposition of terms to these objects but operates at a propositional level [5]. However, such an interpretation may seem incorrect: firstly, in Ockham’s semantics the possibility of supposition
and signification to objects of this type is clearly described; secondly, Ockham’s approach belongs to terminist and not dictatorial ones, i.e. truth condition analysis is carried out through working with terms and not at the level of propositions or dicta.

Therefore, two features are typical for Ockham, which we believe are caused by his nominalistic ontology:

1. Introduction of simple propositions with a demonstrative pronoun as a subject term.

2. Reduction of predication to predication in a present tense proposition.

As Gordon Leff notes, Ockham acknowledges only the existence of individual objects and substances, as well as concepts, which at the same time are “acts of understanding” [8]. It is possible to form a concept or an act of understanding when a person grasps some individual thing; that is a sign or a mental term. Ockham postulates the existence of a mental language, which exists “by nature”. Unfortunately, a study of mental language concept fundamentals falls outside the scope of this article, but the need for reduction to demonstrative pronouns follows from a nominalistic interest in recognizing the existence of single objects or substances only.

The introduction of propositions with demonstrative pronouns as subject terms allows us to explain and simplify the predication layout, thereby allowing for verification of propositions of this type and knowledge absuppositout past or future validity of these propositions.

References


15See more about this in [15].
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Овремененные пропозиции в логике
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Данная статья представляет собой реконструкцию подхода средневекового схола- ста, представителя логики новых Уильяма Оккама к анализу овремененных пред- ложений. Основным источником статьи является глава 7 второй книги и глава 72 первой книги трактата *Summa Logicae*. В этих главах Уильям Оккам отказыва- ется от традиционного схоластического инструмента для анализа овремененных пропозиций — амплиацию, взамен предлагая собственный способ. Цель данной ста- тьи состоит в выяснении того, по каким причинам Оккам не использует данный инструмент анализа условий истинности предложений о будущем и прошлом. В начале статьи предлагается текстологическая реконструкция структуры седьмой главы и ее основных аргументов, после чего эксплицируется роль субъектного тер- мина и правила предикации в овремененных позициях. Далее строится основная схема анализа условий истинности овремененных пропозиций, согласно У. Оккаму. В статье показано, что основанием отказа от амплиацию были онтологические интересы схоласта, которые, в частности, выразились в его полемике с реалистом У. Бурлеем. Вместо традиционной дизъюнкции Уильям Оккам предлагает выде- ление двух смыслов пропозиции. Это приводит его систему к некоторым семанти- ческим противоречиям: референция к сущностям, не существующим в настоящем времени, не редуцируется до традиционной референции в настоящем. Для реше- ния этой проблемы Уильям Оккам вводит простые категорические пропозиции с демонстративами. Их онтологическая простота имеет два теоретических обос- нования: первое — номинализм схоласта, в котором признается существование только индивидуальных вещей и субстанций, второе — его концепцию менталь- ного языка.

Ключевые слова: амплиация, суппозиция условия истинности, средневековая ло- гика