

What Role Should Propositions Have in the Theory of Meaning? Review Essay: Scott Soames.

What is meaning?

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Kirk Ludwig

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What is Meaning? addresses “an unsolved problem at the heart of our conception of what meaning is, and what we want from a theory of meaning” (p. 2). The problem is whether propositions, as they are traditionally conceived, can play the roles intended for them in theories of language and mind.

It approaches to the theory of meaning that trace their lineage back to Frege, propositions are structured sentence meanings, construed as abstract objects. They intrinsically represent states of affairs and are the timeless bearers of truth-values. In virtue of this they are to be able to play their various roles in our theories of thought and meaning. They are the referents of names (‘Logicism’, ‘The Banach-Tarski Paradox’) and demonstratives (‘That’s true/false’, ‘That’s surprising!’), the values of variables of quantification (‘Of all the mathematical conjectures proven in the 20th century perhaps the most famous was Fermat’s Last Theorem’), and the objects of belief and other attitudes (‘Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as *six impossible things before breakfast*’). Soames says that they are “needed to state the goals of semantic theory, and to relate semantics to the interpretation of speakers” (p. 3). But what are propositions?

Any theory of propositions must answer two questions. First, if we traffic in them, how are we able we “entertain” or “grasp” them? Second, what enables them to *represent* and so to be the bearers of truth conditions? The traditional answer was that we grasped by them by a special intellectual faculty and that propositions are (a) *intrinsically* representational and (b) that from which everything else inherits their representational properties. *What is Meaning?* argues that nothing can satisfy the second of these conditions in particular, and sketches a positive account of the nature of propositions which aims to answer both questions, namely, that propositions are *certain structured cognitive events types*.

A compact and densely argued 129 pages, *What is Meaning?* divides into seven chapters. The first introductory chapter sketches the project. The second argues

K. Ludwig (✉)

Philosophy Department, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405-7005, USA
e-mail: ludwig@indiana.edu

against Fregean and Russellian accounts of propositions. The third argues against truth conditional accounts of meaning. This is intended to show that propositions cannot be jettisoned in the light of the difficulties traditional accounts encounter. The fourth mines an insight from Russell's multiple-relation theory of judgment: that "what unites the elements of a proposition, and gives it representational import, is something that agents do when they bear cognitive relations to it—namely, predicate one propositional constituent of the others" (p. 65). The next two chapters develop two proposals about how to use this insight in a theory of propositions. Chapter five develops, and then criticizes, a deflationary approach, which preserves propositions as structured entities involving constituents that encode the meanings of constituents of sentences, and treats their representational properties as derived from a relation they bear to agents. The brief chapter six introduces the positive proposal that Soames pursues, namely, the idea that propositions are types of cognitive events of predication by agents. The final chapter extends the proposal, but then identifies a problem in the account of propositions offered in connection with the handling of quantifiers, and so the book ends with a research program rather than a completed account.

Based on lectures delivered at Soochow University in Taiwan, the book conveys the impression of a high caliber philosophical mind actively working through problems. It makes a valuable contribution to understanding the curious role of propositions in the theory of meaning, drawing attention to some of the deepest difficulties facing theories of propositions, while making an ingenious positive proposal. In the following, I discuss the main line of argument. I embrace Soames's negative conclusions about the traditional conception of propositions, but argue that the critique of truth-theoretic approaches to meaning is not as successful, and that the positive proposal, while it avoids some of the difficulties of the tradition, does not show how to make propositions "oil the wheels of a theory of meaning."

Frege and Russell

The brief against Frege and Russell focuses on their treatment of the unity of the proposition. Despite their other differences, Frege and Russell both held that propositions are structured entities, whose constituents correspond to the meaningful constituents of sentences, and which exhibit a kind of unity that is different from just an aggregate or sum of parts.

Frege aimed to solve the problem by distinguishing the logical types of the constituents of propositions (the senses of constituent expressions in sentences expressing them) into saturated and unsaturated entities (and correspondingly for the referents of the expressions). The logical type of the sense that is attached to an expression determines the logical type of the expression, and of its referent. Proper names (in which category Frege included definite descriptions) refer to objects, saturated entities; predicates, or open expressions generally (obtained from a complete expression by replacing one or more significant terms with a variable) refer not to objects but to functions, unsaturated entities. The unity of the proposition arises from its constituents being fitted—hand in glove—to each other. Soames dwells on the difficulties that arise for making sense of Frege's account in light of his commitment to our not being able to introduce names for the entities that his theory requires.

Frege, who confronted the problem in “On Concept and Object,” was willing to accept the consequences of his position and agree that the concept of a horse is not a concept, and that by this means we seek to say something which no such form of words could convey (“by a necessity of language”). Frege appealed to his reader to “begrudge a pinch of salt.” Soames is having none of it. Whereas Frege argues that some parts of a thought must be incomplete “otherwise they would not hold together” (quoted on page 18), Soames argues that, for example, in the proposition that John is human, it is enough that it have as constituents John and humanity, and that “*something* about the proposition indicates that, in it, humanity is predicated of John” (p. 20). Soames concludes that “Frege’s doctrines of unsaturatedness and incompleteness are neither established by his arguments nor the solution to any coherent problem about the unity of the proposition” (p. 23).

Russell’s solution in *Principles of Mathematics* was not to rely on a difference in logical type of propositional constituent between predicative and non-predicative but on the way a constituent occurs in a proposition, in a predicative or non-predicative role. Objects occur in only one role, but concepts (or universals) can appear in two roles, in the role of a subject or in a predicative role. What shows this? As in the case of a sentence, it must be something about its structure. But there is a problem, as Soames persuasively argues: no matter what formal structure of the propositional constituents we consider, there is nothing in it which “by its every nature, indicates that anything is predicated of anything” and so “there is nothing intrinsic to such structures that makes them representational, and so capable of being true or false” (p. 31). We could adopt rules to interpret them, he says (and this is in practice what happens for the notations we introduce). This (pp. 31–2) “would be to *endow* the structures with representational meaning or content, thereby making them bearers of truth and falsity. However, it could *not* make them propositions in the Frege-Russell sense.” And this is because they would not then be intrinsically representational and that in terms of which we understood the truth and falsity of other entities like sentences and beliefs. Hence, such propositions cannot play the fundamental role of explaining meaning they are intended to. Soames concludes that “if by ‘propositions’ one means what Frege and Russell did, then there are no such things” (p. 32). This is the problem that drives the argument of the book.

I think this important negative claim of Soames’s is correct. The only response would be to claim that it is a *sui generis unanalyzable* feature of a proposition that one element of it is predicated of another. But at that point it all begins to look like it is simply a projection of the facts we recognize about sentences onto propositions, not an explanation of the facts about sentences and thoughts in terms of propositions—the reification of a puzzle rather than its solution.

Truth-conditional Semantics

One might think: so much the worse for propositions. Let’s just get rid of them. Chapter 3 is intended to show that that would be a mistake, because the only other going concern, the appeal to truth conditions to explain meaning, is untenable. There is something puzzling about this, for given the opening story, Soames must think propositions are needed for certain roles even if truth-theoretic semantics satisfies all the desiderata on a semantic theory. What elimination of the competition is required

for is not securing a role for propositions (or something like them at any rate) but a central role for propositions in semantic theory. In any case, Soames has in mind two different sorts of project here. One is Davidson's project. The other is the idea of identifying meaning with modalized truth conditions. We take these up in turn.

There are some mistakes in Soames's account of Davidson's project. First, he gets its motivation wrong. He says that it resulted from thinking that model theory provides interpretations of formal languages, and so might also do that for natural languages. But that wasn't the idea at all. It was rather that introducing entities to serve as the meanings of expressions didn't help with the project of providing a compositional semantics for a language, but that once we see that in effect what we would get is a sentence of the form '*s* ... *p*' where '*s*' was a description of an object language expression as composed out of its primitive parts and '*p*' was replaced by a sentence that translated it, we could get the same result from a truth theory that met Tarski's Convention T.

Soames also, perhaps in part because of this initial mistake, gets wrong what Davidson takes to be the meaning theory: "Davidson originally thought that a truth theory for L would count as a theory of meaning, if knowledge of what it states was sufficient for understanding L" (p. 35). Of course, if what the truth theory stated was sufficient, then it would be an adequate meaning theory, given what Davidson demanded of it. But it is a mistake to say that Davidson thought that knowledge of what the truth theory stated was sufficient. He thought you had to know that the theory was interpretive as well, and to know what the relevant theorems stated, and a canonical proof of them. This confusion is present throughout Soames's discussion, even when he is introducing the other things that Davidson thinks you have to know. But Davidson himself makes clear that he did not take the truth theory to state something sufficient to understand the object language or to itself be a meaning theory. "[O]n reflection it is clear that a T-sentence does not give the meaning of the sentence it concerns: the T-sentence does fix the truth value relative to certain conditions, but it does not say the object language sentence is true because the conditions hold" (Davidson 2001a, b 138). "A theory of truth, no matter how well selected, is not a theory of meaning" (Davidson 2001a, b 179).

Soames's main criticism, however, might be thought to survive correction of these points. Because it is the centerpiece of his criticism of Davidson's program, let me quote the passage in full (see also in this connection the exchange in (Soames 2008; Lepore and Ludwig 2011):

Can we take a truth theory for L to yield a theory of meaning if knowledge of that which is stated by the conjunction of its axioms, plus knowledge, of this conjunctive claim, that it is stated by a *translational* truth theory, is sufficient for understanding L? No, we can't, since even this knowledge *isn't* sufficient to understand L. One can know, of the relevant conjunctive claim, that it is stated by a truth theory that generates translational T-theorems, without knowing which of the infinitely many different T-theorems generated for each sentence is the translational one—and so, without understanding the sentence. Nor is it sufficient to add something to a truth theory identifying the *translational* T-theorems. [i] Although having all this information would enable one to understand L's sentences, the only role played by knowledge of the theorem

labeled “translational” for a given *S* is that of identifying a claim in which *S* is paired with a content specified as expressed by a translation of it. [ii] *Neither the truth of the translational T-theorem, nor the fact that it states the truth conditions of S, plays any role in this interpretation.* [iii] All it does is supply a mapping that could be provided just as well in other ways. [iv] One could get the same interpretive results by replacing the truth predicate in such a theory with *any arbitrary predicate F whatsoever*. [v] Whether or not the resulting theory is true makes no difference. [vi] To interpret *S*, all one needs to know, of the claim expressed by the canonical *F*-theorem, is that it links *S* with *the content expressed by a translation of S*. [vii] Since this isn’t enough for an *F*-theory to count as a theory of meaning, it isn’t enough for a truth theory to do so either. (pp. 37–8; bracketed roman numerals added)

I have numbered the sentences I want to discuss for convenience. Soames identifies almost all the ingredients needed to use a truth theory to interpret object language sentences. We must know that it is, as he says, translational, i.e., meets Convention T (or an analog for context sensitive languages—more on this in moment). We must know what its axioms state. We must add something sufficient to identify the theorems in virtue of which it is translational. Then he says that, though this would put us in a position to interpret any sentence in the object language, it would not count as a meaning theory. Why not?

[i] He says that the only role of the canonical theorem for a sentence *s* is to pair it with a sentence (used) that is a translation of it.

We can grant that for a context insensitive language the canonical theorem does this, and it is also clear from a careful reading of Davidson that this was a desideratum for him on getting a successful theory for such a language. It is not true that the only work that the truth theory does is expressed in its theorems, however. For we want to start from axioms that are interpretive, that is, that themselves use metalanguage expressions that interpret the object language expressions for which they give satisfaction conditions, and then through the proofs of the canonical theorems see how the parts in virtue of their meanings contribute to fixing interpretive truth conditions for the sentences of the object language (Lepore and Ludwig 2005, esp. c. 9). The recursive structure of the truth theory gives us insight into the semantic structure of the object language. Soames treats it as a device whose aim is simply to match a mentioned object language sentence with a sentence that translates it in a use position. But that is not the sole point of the project: we want also to see what the compositional semantic structure of the object language is. And for that the proofs are essential.

In addition, what Soames says here is clearly false for a context sensitive language. For instance, the canonical theorem for ‘Je fahme’, does not match ‘Je fahme’ with a translation of it.

(u)(t)(‘Je fahme’ is true-in-French(u, t) iff u is hungry at t),

It matches it with an open sentence. It gives then a way of specifying, relative to our knowledge that the theory meets the analog of Convention T for a context sensitive language (it generates all theorems in which one can replace ‘is true-in-L(u,t) iff’ with ‘means(u,t) that’ and get a true sentence), what that sentence means understood relative

to a particular speaker and time. This clearly does a lot more than a translation theory does, which would simply match ‘Je faime’ with ‘I am hungry’, and that is forced by the goal of providing truth conditions that interpret *utterances* of the sentence.

[ii] Soames says that the truth of the theorem and the fact that it states the truth conditions of the sentence plays no role in the interpretation. The second of these claims ignores the importance of the proof in revealing compositional structure. And given that, the truth of the theorem matters, provided that there are no defective predicates in it, for otherwise it wouldn’t do the job in revealing compositional structure that it is supposed to do.

[iii] Soames says all it does is provide a mapping that could be provided in other ways. But, again, the point is not just the output but also how it is generated. To focus on the mapping as the point is to lose track of the idea that we are giving a compositional meaning theory, and so to lose track of the idea that how we arrive at the mapping is also crucial to the insight we are seeking.

[iv]–[v] Soames claims one could get the same result by replacing the truth predicate with any arbitrary predicate whatsoever, and that it doesn’t matter whether the resulting theory is true. The result he has in mind is matching a mentioned object language sentence with one used that translates it, but we have seen that this is not in fact the result we aim at for a context sensitive language, and that we also want to reveal semantic structure through the canonical proof a theorem. But in any case, what would it look like if we did what Soames suggests? Could we get all we want, including information about compositional structure, out of a theory we obtain from a truth theory by replacing the semantic predicates arbitrarily with other predicates (constrained to play the same grammatical role)? Let’s try it, with ‘hits with u at t’ for ‘satisfies(u,t)’ and ‘is knocked-out by u at t’ for ‘is true(u,t)’ (using square brackets in the following for Quinean corner quotation marks).

For any function f , variable v , speaker u , time t , f hits with u at t [v is red] iff $f(v)$ is red.

For any function f , formula ϕ variable v , f hits with u at t [$(v)\phi$] iff every v -variant f' of f hits with u at t ϕ .

Etc.

A canonical proof procedure would yield the theorems like,

$[(x)(x \text{ is red})]$ is knocked-out by u at t iff every x is such that x is red.

Now, supposing that we knew that the theorems were interpretive in roughly the sense we had in mind for the truth theory—the “hitting conditions” are given using metalanguage terms that interpret the object language terms—and we know that canonical theorems yield a statement of “knocking-out conditions” that interpret the object language sentences, wouldn’t we have all that we needed, though all the theorems are false, even nonsensical?

Given how we have constructed the theory, replacing ‘satisfies(u,t)’ and ‘is true(u,t)’ with arbitrary predicates, we also still know what an interpretive truth theory for the language looks like and that we have here precisely the structure of such a theory. Suppose, however, this were presented to someone who did not know how it was

derived and didn't see immediately that it was the structure of a truth theory. And suppose that person were told that the axioms were interpretive in the sense indicated and that the canonical theorems were interpretive. Would he be missing anything that we have? I think the answer is 'yes'. He would see that there was a way of reading off from the theorems what the object language sentences mean. But he would not get any insight into the semantic structure of the object language sentences, because the fact that the axioms were interpretive would not show him in any way how the meanings of the object language terms as expressed by the used metalanguage expressions in the axioms contributed to fixing systematically semantic features like truth of object language sentences. This would make the theory (for him) a mere calculus, an instrument for connecting object language sentences with sentences that translate them or interpret them in a context. But a truth theory reveals the semantical roles of the object language expressions. Therefore, it is false that the same results can be achieved by replacing the truth predicate with any arbitrary predicate and ignoring whether or not the theory is true. Knowing that the vehicle that does the recursive work is a truth theory plays an important role in revealing compositional semantic structure.

Of course, if one knows enough about truth theories, one will immediately see that we have the form of a truth theory and a condition that suffices for fixing the extension of the predicate as the extension of the concept of truth as restricted to the language, if we let the predicates be interpreted by stipulating the truth of the theory containing them. Then we would get the information we wanted—but it would be because we realized we had the materials to construct a truth theory to hand.

Apart from this point, we can also note that for Davidson the truth theory was supposed to play a role in radical interpretation, and so to be linked to behavior and attitudes, especially hold true attitudes, and it is clear that substituting an arbitrary predicate for the truth predicate would not make any sense in that context. Confirmation of a truth theory for a speaker or community by a radical interpreter for Davidson was to represent a substantive condition that could be placed on a truth theory that would ensure that it was interpretive, revealing thereby constitutive connections between the concepts of the theory and evidence that did not presuppose their application.

[v]–[vi] Soames claims that since the F-theory's matching object language sentences with metalanguage sentences in use that translate them isn't enough for the F-theory to be a theory of meaning, it isn't enough for a truth theory to be a theory of meaning either. Now, in response to this, we need to first point out that the F-theory does not enable one to see what the semantic structure of object language sentences is, which is the point we have just made, but also, second, to note that the truth theory was never supposed to be the meaning theory in the first place, but rather a certain body of knowledge about it. This also helps to show that enough knowledge about the F-theory might do the trick, but it would only be because it enabled us to get the compositional story going by way of seeing how to construct a truth theory from it which was in fact true (modulo defective predicates). Apart from this, there is also the question what more exactly Soames would want out of a meaning theory. He says the F-theory is not a meaning theory. Why not? Plausibly because it only provides matching of sentences with sentence and gives no insight into compositional structure. But if that is once made explicit, it focuses attention on precisely how truth theories are superior.

To sum up: my diagnosis of what's gone wrong in the criticism that Soames advances in this passage is that he thinks the truth theory itself is supposed to be the meaning theory and he has supposed that the whole point of the truth theory is exhausted in the matching of an object language sentence with a metalanguage sentence in use that translates it, whereas the point is also centrally to reveal compositional semantic structure.

What does this mean for the overall project of the book? It does not immediately follow that there is no role for propositions in understanding natural language. There are the roles that Soames cites for propositions as the referents of certain noun phrases, the values of variables of quantification in certain sentences, and the referents of complement clauses in attitude reports and other constructions—one might be skeptical of the need here but accepting it is compatible with endorsing truth-theoretic semantics. But the failure to deliver a knockout blow to truth-theoretic semantics does raise the question whether propositions should have any role in giving a compositional semantic theory for natural language, as well as the question what the goals of such a theory should be. The fact that certain terms in natural languages refer or putatively refer (if that is so) to propositions no more shows that propositions should play a role in the theory of meaning than the fact that certain terms in natural languages refer to horses shows that horses should play a role in the theory of meaning. I will return to these issues at the end.

The second main approach that Soames takes up in chapter 3 may be quickly set aside. It is to explain meaning in terms of truth conditions across possible worlds, and specifically to identify the meaning of an expression with a function from world states (epistemically possible relative to competence in the language) to extensions. We need not work through details to see the trouble: it is that meaning cuts finer than sets of possible worlds: it does not follow from the claim that (1) for all worlds w , s is true (in L) in w iff at w , p , that (2) s means in L that p . At most what follows is the analytic equivalence of 'p' in the metalanguage with s in L .

Structured Propositions and Insight from the Multiple-relation Theory of Judgment

Chapter 3 is to have shown that much as we might want to find an alternative to propositions, we cannot avoid their embrace. Chapter 4 then develops the problem broached at the end of chapter 2 for the structured propositions approach by considering the semantics of attitude sentences in particular, and then takes up an idea Russell introduces with the multiple-relation theory of judgment that is to provide the seed for a solution to the problem, which is pursued through the remaining chapters of the book.

Soames proposes a two-stage semantic theory. In the first stage, we provide a recursive assignment of structured propositions to sentences of the language on the basis of assignments of entities to their semantically primitive parts, which are to be fitted into the propositional structures assigned to sentences in which those parts appear. In the second stage, world relative truth conditions are recursively assigned to propositions. Soames provides a sketch of a theory of the relevant type for a simple language with conjunction, negation, existential quantification and a belief predicate. (It is worth noting in passing that the form this takes requires assimilating, as Frege did, logical connectives and quantifiers to predicates—this is connected with the

problem Soames raises at the end of the book.) There are some respects in which the details need to be cleaned up, and 1a and 1b on page 51 do not follow, as Soames claims, from the axiom schemata. (A similar problem attends the deflationary theory of chapter 5.) The trouble is instructive. 1a will serve as an example.

1a. If ‘John believes that someone loves Mary’ is true at w , then there is a proposition that John believes at w which is true at any world-state w^* iff someone loves Mary at w^* .

1a uses ‘loves’ in stating the truth conditions for the proposition, which is the intended interpretation of ‘loves’ in the object language. But the axioms that assign propositions to atomic sentences identify the property associated with a predicate only by way of its being the property the predicate expresses. So we aren’t in a position to pick it out in a way that would reveal informatively what property it is, that is, to know to use ‘love’ to express it in the metalanguage. We could understand the theory and what proposition it assigns to every sentence but not understand any sentence of the object language. This is a general problem for theories that assign entities to expressions. We get the illusion of understanding only if we choose names for them that at least code for expressions we understand which we know to interpret the expressions to which the entities are assigned.

In any case, even if we could derive 1a from the theorems, as Soames notes, the theory falls short of what we want from a meaning theory. Even 1a, if it were derivable, would not tell us what precisely John believes but only put constraints on it. And Soames says (p. 54), “This is, I believe, an instance of the problem Donald Davidson had in mind forty-three years ago” in saying that meanings do not “oil the wheels of a theory of meaning.” I think this is right, but also that the more fundamental point is the one mentioned above, that naming an entity that is to be the meaning of an expression gives us no understanding of it except insofar as the name gives us a way to associate with it an expression we understand and understand to interpret it. We will recur to this point, which dogs every theory of propositions.

Soames turns to what he calls a neglected insight of Russell’s, which is represented in his turn to the multiple-relation theory of judgment. We reject the view that ‘ x believes that p ’ expresses a binary relation between x and a proposition p . Instead, we take what were formerly said to be the constituents of the proposition—let us take ‘Desdemona loves Cassio’ as our example—and treat believing as a relation between x and Desdemona and Cassio and the relation of loving. We are to think of what is expressed by, say, ‘Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio’ as a fact, and then that fact will have a certain structure, and its structure would be what determined how Desdemona and Cassio were being represented with respect to loving, i.e., who is the lover and who the beloved. What Soames wants to mine from this is the idea that a mental act is essential for bringing it about that there is a genuine representation, and that this involves in the most basic case a property or relation be predicated (in some sense) of an object or series of objects. Soames puts it this way:

To ask what makes all of these facts representational is to ask what the agent’s cognitive attitude adds to the objects of his attitude to bring it about that the world is represented as being one way rather than another. What, for example, does the agent add to the elements Desdemona, loving, and Cassio to bring it

about that the agent's belief that Desdemona loves Cassio represents the world in the way that it does. (p. 64; italics in the original)

Note the shift from the focus on what the *attitude* adds to what the *agent* adds from the first to the second sentence in this passage. It is in terms of the latter formulation that Soames proceeds. Thus, the multiple-relation theory of judgment, as this shift suggests, plays an inspirational rather than evidential role, and Soames does not embrace it but rather aims to use his insight to reintroduce an improved sort of proposition as the object of the attitudes. Soames goes on immediately to say:

In asking this question, it is important to bear two points in mind. First, what one agent adds to these constituents to bring it about that his or her belief represents the world in this way is *the same* as what any other agent adds to bring it about that this other agent's belief represents the world in the same way. Second, what any agent adds to Desdemona, loving, and Cassio to bring it about that a belief that Desdemona loves Cassio represents the world in a certain way is the same as what an agent adds to those constituents to bring it about that an assertion, hypothesis, conjecture that Desdemona loves Cassio represents things in the same way. When these two facts are kept in mind, the answer to our question is obvious. *What the agent does* in all these cases to bring it about that his or her belief, assertion, hypothesis, or conjecture *represents* Desdemona as loving Cassio is to *predicate* one constituent of the judgment—the loving relation—of the other two—Desdemona followed by Cassio. (pp. 64–5)

It is this idea, that attitudes involve acts of *predication*, which takes center stage in Soames's positive proposal. It has two key features. It locates the source of representation in an agent's acts, and it treats propositions as getting their representational properties in relation to that. It rejects then both of the central features of the Frege-Russell view: propositions are not (a) intrinsically representational and they are not (b) that from which everything else inherits their representational properties.

But what is this act of predicating? Are we to take seriously the suggestion that it is an action? Are we to take seriously that there must be one or more events involved in any propositional attitude? What kind of action or event is predicating? Are we to think of an item, a property, or relation, as being “grasped” and “applied” by an agent to another thing, and does this require thinking about each of them first? If we regard it as an action, a regress threatens, for actions are intended under some description, and so any act of predication would presuppose a prior attitude, which would presuppose prior acts of predication. Suppose we regard it as an event, then. Even so, if we must think of the property and object in order to predicate the one of the other, does not predication again presuppose thought, and if thought presupposes predication, are we not off on a regress again? Suppose then we do not regard ‘predication’ as involving an act or thought of the agent, but something the occurrence of which is involved in a thought in virtue of which the thought, as a vehicle of representation, is possible, and specifically, whatever is involved in resolving the question, given its constituents, what roles they have in the thought, as object or predicate, etc., as we might put it. How much illumination is left: something about thoughts suffices for them to represent (in various modes) things as standing in

relations and having properties, and so on. What we have is the idea that *something* makes a belief a representation, a slide to thinking that it must be *a making by the person* whose belief it is, and the introduction of a suggestive label, ‘predicate’, for the type of act (or event, or property) in question. But for all the illumination it provides, we might as well have said that the agent *zegas* the property of loving to Desdemona and Cassio in that order, where we mean by that whatever the agent does or undergoes or whatever is true of the agent that brings it about that he represents Desdemona as loving Cassio: a we know not what we know not why. To the extent to which this is better than Frege’s unsaturated senses and objects it is because it rejects the idea that mental states get their representational properties from something intrinsically representational and mind-independent—but like Frege’s strategy it seems more to label a problem than to solve it.

The Deflationary Account of Propositions

Having expressed some doubt about the explanatory potential of this idea, let’s see how it is to be deployed. Soames makes a preliminary suggestion about how we can introduce propositions on this basis, namely,

... by collecting the multiple constituents of all representationally equivalent instances of believing, asserting, and the like into a single formal structure in which one constituent is identified as predicated of the others. We may then give a deflationary account of what it is for an agent to bear the relation of *entertaining* ... to this representational structure. It is simply for the agent to predicate that which is so indicated in the structure of the other constituents of the structure. (p. 65)

This deflationary account is only a way station to the final positive proposal. It is developed, and rejected, in chapter 5. The criticism serves as a springboard for the final positive account of propositions—a realist conception—in chapters 6 and 7. The basic idea is this. Take the constituents common between asserting, believing, wondering whether, hoping, etc., it is the case that, for example, Desdemona loves Cassio. These would be Desdemona, loving and Cassio. Find a formal structure (any structure will do) in which to embed these, say, <loving, <Desdemona, Cassio>>. Call this the proposition. Identify one element as predicated of the others, in a certain order. This is something we do as theorists, an interpretive decision we make. Then define what it is for an agent to “entertain” this structure in terms of his predicating loving of Desdemona and Cassio in that order. Then we can say that the agent “believes” the proposition when he predicates loving of Desdemona and Cassio in the belief mode, etc. We can then explain what it is for such propositions to be true by saying that they are true just in case an agent would have a true belief if he “believed” the proposition. The account is deflationary in the sense that it doesn’t take seriously the idea that there is any unique thing with which to identify a proposition, and this turns out to be its Achilles heel as well.

The only requirement on propositions on this account is that they have enough structure to encode all the semantically significant structure of sentences (in a language and relative to a context as necessary) to which they are to be assigned. The arbitrariness of structure and encoding within this constraint means that we must

speak of a sentence expressing a proposition only relative to a system of structures together with its interpretation.

I will not discuss any details of the (again two-stage) theory that Soames introduces in chapter 5. The details don't matter for the main difficulty that the approach faces. A couple of things are worth noting about the approach, however. First, insofar as we take the axioms of the theory to be revealing semantic structure, it carries, in its details (like the theory of chapter 4), the Fregean commitment that all expressions except those receiving reference clauses are predicative. Second, the main effect of the theory is to provide a recursive way of matching each object language sentence with a metalanguage expression that encodes a metalanguage sentence that we understand and understand to be the same in meaning as the object language sentence. Since an interpretive truth theory does this job just as well, without the need of the Procrustean bed of the Fregean commitment, which is motivated solely by the exigencies of the current approach, and without the proposition as a middleman, one might well wonder, even apart from the difficulties the approach faces that transcend the details, why one should bother.

Soames's initial strategy is to try to make good on the thought that these artificial entities can do the job of propositions without being intrinsically representational. We are to think of a deflationist who introduces arbitrary structures to keep track of agents' attitudes and speech acts. The trouble is that these "propositions" must be interpreted. On the present approach, it is the theorist who decides what structures to use in his theory, for it is relative to *his interpretation of them* that they do what work they do (how like sentences are propositions on this view), and the choice, beyond certain constraints, is arbitrary. The introduction of technical terms paralleling the ordinary 'entertain', 'believe', etc., as sketched above, does not render such structures interpreted absent the theorist's use. We are basically saying that an agent bears a certain relation, entertains*/believes*/etc. to a structure S that is (according to the theorist) to *be* or maybe *represent* the proposition that p in accordance with a *interpretation* M just in case the agent entertains/believes/etc. (in the ordinary sense) p and, according to M, S is interpreted as meaning that p. It is not in virtue of agents bearing this relation to S (whatever we call it!) that S represents, but, if at all, only in virtue of the theorist so treating it—and then just for the theorist. Clearly, if this were sufficient, independent of the theorist's use, absolutely everything would represent absolutely everything, since for anything there is a mapping of objects onto propositions that takes it to any proposition you like.

Soames toys with the idea that it would be sufficient: "they are representational only in virtue of the cognitive attitudes one may bear to them" (p. 88), he says, where he has in mind, it seems, these artificial relations. Later he raises a worry about the "legitimacy of characterizing propositions—thought of as theoretically useful tracking devices—as representational in virtue of what seems to be an artificial relation they bear to predicative acts of agents"; they seem to be "nothing more than theoretically useful fictions" (p. 94), and since all that there really is in the world are the cognitive states of agents, it seems false that these abstract structures "are bearers of truth value and the objects of attitudes" (p. 95). This is all to the good, but Soames blunts the force of his remarks when he follows this by saying that he is "not sure there is any obvious way of establishing this negative conclusion" (p. 95).

Prescinding from details, what is the main difficulty? Propositions are supposed to be what actual agents are related to independently of the language they speak (or we might as well embrace sententialism) when we and they say that they believe various things, and what they refer to when *they* use terms like ‘Logicism’ and when they use complement clauses in ascribing attitudes to themselves and others. Yet one theorist might work with one structure and another with another, indifferently, so far as the deflationary approach goes. They can’t both be right about what ordinary agents are related to (if to propositions at all), and nothing in the deflationary approach gives us any ground to choose between them. In short, there is no reason to think that the structures that the theorist arbitrarily chooses to play a role in the recursive assignment of truth conditions to sentences will in virtue of that fact play the other roles of propositions as the objects of the attitudes, the values of certain variables of quantification, and the referents of certain terms, as that surely has to do not with the decisions of theorists but rather with how the speakers of the language think and use words.

Soames introduces the deflationary theory only to criticize it himself. What is his criticism? It focuses on the idea that “the only proposition-forming operation” the theory employs “is predication.” And he says: “If the theory is to work, all proposition-forming predications must be predications that agents can perform” (p. 95). And his worry is that while there is no puzzle about agents predicating properties of objects, when it comes to predicating properties of propositions, where these are the structured entities introduced by the theory, there is no reason to think agents are in fact doing any such thing, because these are just arbitrary structures.

Since propositions, on this view, are just abstract structures, it is not clear why there is any need for a “proposition-forming operation.” Nor, if one examines the theory closely, does there appear to be anything in it that corresponds to proposition forming. Propositions are assigned recursively to sentences, and their truth conditions are given. The phrase ‘predicated of’ appears in the specification of truth conditions, but it appears also to be dispensable. Furthermore, if we thought of the satisfaction of ‘predicated of’ as requiring an actual act of predication, then many of what would be intended to be true propositions would be false because no agents, including the theorist, would have performed the relevant predications (and not just of propositions). On the other hand, if merely the possibility of performing the predication were enough, then whether agents do or not, surely it is possible that they or some agent could, even of the theorist’s arbitrary choice of a proposition.

The real worry may be better expressed in the following passage:

The theory’s motivating idea is that propositions are constructions used by theorists to model the structure of agents’ acts of predication. However, since the acts being modeled include those in which properties are predicated of *propositions*, it would seem that propositions must be parts of the reality being modeled, rather than merely components of the model. This challenges the theory’s leading idea. (pp. 97–8)

Here I think the basic idea is just that actual agents do in fact think about propositions in addition to ordinary objects, and if theorists’ propositions are to serve the role of being those things ordinary agents think and talk about, then they must choose just the right structure. In the end, I think that Soames’s complaint is just the one I sketched above.

The Cognitive-Realist Theory of Propositions

I turn now to Soames's Cognitive-Realist Theory of Propositions. Soames credits Jim Pryor with the basic suggestion. The idea has also independently been advanced by Peter Hanks (2011).

The proposal is simple. Soames has already located the source of representation in acts of predication by agents. The idea is to identity propositions with, not the act, but the corresponding event types. Thus, for example, we would identify the proposition that snow is white with the event type of predicating whiteness of snow. This makes propositions intrinsically connected to the cognitive acts they track, it provides an object to which all agents may plausibly be related in thinking about propositions, and it (thereby) avoids the arbitrariness that is involved in picking some abstract structure of the basic constituents of propositions. In particular, these are event types that agents are already acquainted with. Since whenever an agent forms an attitude toward a proposition, the agent must entertain the proposition, at the time he must also instantiate the event type which is (on this account) the object of his attitude. Thus, Soames says, in being acquainted with his own cognitive acts, he can become acquainted with the propositions they are instantiations of, and it becomes unmysterious how agents can be thinking about propositions so construed and predicating things of them. As Soames puts it,

Propositions, properly conceived, are not an *independent* source of that which is representational in mind and language; rather, propositions are representational *because* of their intrinsic connection to the inherently representational cognitive events in which agents predicate some things of other things. (p. 107)

And this, Soames says, solves the problem that Davidson emphasized. Frege-Russell propositions “don't put us in a position to understand what [the sentences to which they are assigned] mean” (p. 107). But on the cognitive-realist conception of propositions they can play the role of sentence meanings dreamed of by theorists since Frege, while also being epistemologically and metaphysically acceptable” (p. 107).

The basic account is supplemented with the act of applying a function to an argument in order to accommodate the distinction between such propositions as that $6^3 > 14^2$ and that $216 > 196$. We describe the structure of the first of these in terms of acts of application of the cube and square functions to 6 and 14, but not the latter. To accommodate propositions involving functions applied to objects for which they are not defined such as the proposition that $\sqrt{2} > 1$ we allow that predicating a relation of $\sqrt{2}$ does not require its existence (just as, Soames says, believing that $\sqrt{2}$ exists does not require it to exist). Roughly speaking, the idea throughout is to think of propositional structure as built up out of acts on objects that parallel sentence structure. Thus, for conjunctive and disjunctive propositions we introduce the acts (or events) of conjoining or disjoining. For negation, we can introduce the act of negating.

A problem arises for this happy picture when we turn to quantification. The trouble, Soames points out, is that if we treat the proposition that everything is F as involving a predication, it looks as if it has to be a matter of predicating *being true of everything* of being F. But the troublesome quantifier reappears, and it is evidently not a primitive, so we are off on an infinite regress. The problem extends to restricted

quantifiers, and various maneuvers one might propose to overcome the difficulty dissolve into verbal conjury.

What about the hopeful thought of “expanding the range of cognitive acts involved in entertaining various propositions to include quantificational acts” (p. 129)? After all, one might as well hang for a sheep as for a lamb. Why not propose, in addition to predicating, applying, negating, conjoining and disjoining properties, and negating, conjoining and disjoining propositions, types of quantifying acts? Soames confesses that he does not see exactly how it is supposed to go. And so the book ends with this problem of finding a replacement for the Frege-Russell treatment of quantification, which Soames notes is a problem for any structured propositions approach.

Overall Assessment

How promising an avenue is this to solving the problems that have plagued propositions in the theory of meaning? I am not encouraged, for a number of reasons, independent of the final worry about quantification.

First, despite what Soames claims, the approach is not an advance over traditional theories of propositions in responding to Davidson’s objection to the utility of propositions in the theory of meaning. It may seem as if that is so because we have identified propositions with act types that are intrinsically representational. But that was never the problem. The problem is that, even if they are intrinsically representational, merely referring to them does not tell you what they represent. The point goes for propositional constituents as well. So recursively assigning a structured entity to a sentence does not give any insight into what the sentence means by itself. What does is assigning the referent in such a way as to enable us to construct a sentence we understand from it, which enables us to interpret it in light of the knowledge that that sentence is to be the same in meaning as the sentence to which the proposition is assigned (in the context). Once that is clear, and once it is clear that that work can be done without propositions by way of an interpretive truth theory, it is clear that the cognitive-realist concept of propositions, even if it gives the correct account of what propositional terms refer to in natural language, does not really aid in the project of constructing a semantic theory for a natural language, at least if a minimal condition on the success of such a theory is to enable anyone who understands it to understand the language for which it is a theory.

Second, apart from the question of the utility of this or any other conception of proposition in the theory of meaning, the clarity of the notion of propositions introduced in this fashion rests on the clarity of the notion of an act of predication (and the rest). As I noted earlier, it is hardly clear what this comes to, or that there is anything that corresponds to it. There are clear problems with thinking of it as an action (and Soames notes this as well in the final chapter). But even if we think of it as a mere occurrence, it is hardly clear (to me in any case) that there are any such occurrences. I do not mean of course to deny that thoughts take place in time and that a thought, even as a state, has an onset. But is it so clear that as many cognitive events are taking place as required by the theory? I am aware in thinking that I am thinking and what I am thinking. If there are the myriad of acts (or events) that would be required on the cognitive-realist account of propositions, I am unaware of those. And if I am unaware of those, then how can I then be acquainted with the tokens of the

types that are to be the propositions? And if I am not, even apart from the question why we should think they exist, is not one of the advantages that the cognitive-realist approach is to have over the deflationary account lost?

Third, even if this worry could be assuaged by appeal to, for example, structured state types, rather than acts of predication, it is not clear that when cognitive agents are thinking about, for example, what others are thinking or proposing, they are thinking about these structured state (or event) types. Soames urges the account in part for its theoretical utility and capacity to avoid problems that afflict other theories. But it still makes an empirical claim about agents. If we have all been thinking about structured state types all along, why has there been any controversy about what propositions are? Is it that plausible that when I say that John believes that Mary loves him I am relating John to the state type a token of which I am attributing to him? In fact, it is not what I refer to that conveys what it is that John believes but the fact that I use a sentence which my interlocutor understands and understands to be the same in content (as used) as John's belief state. The sentence demonstratively plays a psychological role in our understanding how the sentence conveys what it does. Is there any reason to think the state type it attributes is what the complement clause refers to? How would we settle the issue? It doesn't look as if it matters for the work that the complement does for us.

Finally, it seems doubtful that this approach will shed much light on linguistic meaning. Of course, primitive meaningful expression types in a linguistic community have the meanings they do in virtue of the uses made of them by speakers in the community, and it is virtue of their attitudes having prior intentionality that they are able to impose properties on those expressions that make them suitable for use in meaningful utterances. However, nothing about how speakers do this is revealed by thinking of propositions as certain sorts of structured event types involving the thinking of cognitive agents. An ancillary worry in the same ballpark is that the approach is committed to there being quite a tight match between the contents of thoughts and the contents of sentences. While it is true that we use sentences to keep track of attitudes, it is also quite plausible to think that semantic content often abstracts away from the psychological perspective of language users. I use 'Barack Obama' to refer to Barack Obama, but it seems evident that my way of thinking about him, is deeply perspectival and involves thinking of him via the various streams of information I have got about him—none of which could plausibly be read into the meaning of the name itself.

I have learnt a lot from working through the arguments of this book. Soames makes trenchant criticisms of many of the central doctrines of the tradition on propositions. I think he misses the mark in criticizing truth-theoretic semantics, but despite my reservations about this, and about the positive proposal, this book moves discussion forward considerably, and puts us in a position to see more clearly what role propositions can play in various constructions within language and in the project of understanding what it is to give a semantic theory for a language and to give a theory of *meaning*. In the end, I am left with the conviction that there is little illumination to be found on either front by appeal to propositions—the *ignes fatui* of the philosophy of language.

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