

August 19, 2009

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# **Propositions**

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**To Appear In**

***The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Language***

**Edited by**

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## Propositions

Propositions are traditionally taken to be entities that satisfy assumptions A1 – A3.

- A1. Some things are asserted, believed, and known. These attitudes relate agents – those who assert, believe, or know something – to that which they assert believe, or know.
- A2. The things asserted, believed, and known are bearers of (contingent or necessary) truth and falsity.
- A3. Propositions -- the things satisfying A1, and A2 -- are expressed by sentences. The proposition expressed by S can standardly be designated by expressions such as [the proposition that S], [the statement/claim/assertion/belief that S], or simply [that S].

Since different sentences may be used to assert the same thing, or express the same belief, and different beliefs or assertions may result from accepting, or assertively uttering, the same sentence, propositions are not identical with sentences that express them. Intuitively, they are what different sentences, or utterances, that “say the same thing,” or express the same belief, have in common. The fundamental metaphysical challenge posed by propositions is to identify entities fitting this picture that can play the roles demanded of them in our theories.

One such theory is semantics, within which propositions are needed (i) as referents of certain names -- ‘Logicism’, ‘Church’s Thesis’, ‘Goldbach’s Conjecture’-- (ii) as referents of demonstratives in utterances of sentences like ‘That’s true’, (iii) as entities quantified over in sentences like ‘At least six of the theses advanced by Professor Wyman are unsupported by evidence’, and as objects of the attitudes, as illustrated by ‘Mary believes that Bill questioned several propositions Susan asserted’. Since the objects of the attitudes a sentence S is used to report and express are closely related to the semantic content of S, and since the latter encodes the semantic contents of S’s constituents, as well as its semantically significant syntactic structure, the compositionality of linguistic meaning sharply constrains what propositions can be. In addition, propositions are needed to state the goals of semantic theory, and to relate it to the interpretation of speakers. Even if a language lacks attitude constructions, we still need to know what speakers assert and believe, when they sincerely utter, or assent to, a sentence. Since it is propositions that are asserted and believed, and since semantics is charged with specifying the contribution of the

semantic content of a sentence to what is asserted by utterances of it, propositions are presupposed by our best account of what we want semantic theories to do.

They are also central to philosophical theories of mind, and philosophical psychology. Like sentences, belief states, perceptual states, and other cognitive states have contents that represent the world as being a certain way. Since to have such representational contents is to impose conditions that must be satisfied if the world is to be as it is represented to be, these cognitive states have truth conditions, just as sentences do. If, as seems obvious, different cognitive states can have the same representational content, and hence the same truth conditions, these contents cannot be identified with the states themselves. Rather they are what different states have in common. As with sentences, our question is “What is this common element?” Since, in each case, the content of the state is the proposition to which the agent bears the relevant attitude, this is just our previous question all over again. What are these things, propositions, which different cognitive states, and different sentences, can have in common?

One natural, though ultimately unsatisfactory, answer is that what they have in common is simply their truth conditions. On this view, propositions are not things that have truth conditions; rather, they are the truth conditions that sentences and cognitive states have. The main problem with this idea is that on any reasonable conception of truth conditions, sameness of truth conditions is not sufficient for sameness of assertion, belief, or semantic content. Since different semantic contents, assertions, and beliefs may have the same truth conditions, information about the latter is not sufficient to identify the former. For example, semantic theories that pair each sentence *S* with the set of metaphysically possible world-states at which *S* is true don't provide enough information to allow one who knows the theories to understand what *S* means, or to identify the beliefs expressed, or assertions made, by uses of *S*. This result persists even if we relax the requirement that the world-states – thought of as maximal properties attributed to the universe – be restricted to those that genuinely could have been instantiated, and allow, in addition, metaphysically impossible world-states that can nevertheless be coherently conceived to be instantiated, and cannot be known

apriori not to be. This negative result generalizes to all theories that satisfy (i) –(iii), no matter what they choose as circumstances at which sentences are evaluated for truth.

- (i) The semantic content of a variable relative to an assignment of an object  $o$  is  $o$  itself.
- (ii)  $[P\&Q]$  is true at a circumstance  $E$  iff both conjuncts are true at  $E$ .
- (iii)  $[\exists x Fx]$  is true at  $E$  iff  $Fx$  is true of some object  $o$  at  $E$

Since (i) is well-motivated and (ii)-(iii) are central to theories of truth at a circumstance, we can't identify the semantic contents of sentences (the propositions they express) with functions from circumstances to truth values, no matter how fine-grained the circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Although propositions are indispensable, they can't be extracted from theories of truth conditions.<sup>2</sup>

The positive lesson to be drawn from this negative conclusion is that, where truth conditions are concerned, propositions are explanatorily primary. Instead of being extracted from rules determining the truth conditions of sentences, the propositions expressed by sentences are what their truth conditions are derived from. Since the proposition expressed by  $S$  is its semantic content, it must be composed out of, or otherwise encode, the semantic contents of  $S$ 's constituents. Since truth-conditional intensions (functions from circumstances to extensions) lack this feature, they can't be the semantic contents of complex expressions, or the propositions expressed by sentences. Hence, the need for an independent theory of propositions.

The realist theories of Gottlob Frege (1892a, 1918) and the early Bertrand Russell (1903) provide a starting point. According to both, propositions are meanings of sentences, bearers of truth, and objects of the attitudes. Since they are meanings of structurally complex expressions, Frege and Russell took them to be structurally complex entities the constituents of which are meanings of the constituents of the sentences that express them. This assumption, though natural,

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<sup>1</sup> Soames (1987), (2008c).

led them to what they took to be an unfathomable mystery at the heart of the proposition. Just as sentences aren't merely collections of unrelated expressions, but rather have a structural unity that distinguishes them from mere lists, and is responsible for their representational character, so propositions aren't merely collections of expression meanings, but rather have a unity that distinguishes them from arbitrary aggregates of their parts, and explains how they are able to represent the world. It is this unity that Frege and Russell found mysterious.

Russell put the problem this way.

"Consider, for example, the proposition "A differs from B." The constituents of this proposition, if we analyze it, appear to be only A, difference, B. *Yet these constituents, thus placed side by side, do not reconstitute the proposition. The difference which occurs in the proposition actually relates A and B, whereas the difference after analysis is a notion which has no connection with A and B.* [my emphasis] It may be said that we ought, in the analysis, to mention the relations which difference has to A and B, relations which are expressed by *is* and *from* when we say A is different from B. These relations consist in the fact that A is referent and B relatum with respect to difference. But A, referent, difference, relatum, B, is still merely a list of terms, not a proposition. *A proposition, in fact, is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition. The verb, when used as a verb, embodies the unity of the proposition, and is thus distinguishable from the verb considered as a term, though I do not know how to give a clear account of the precise nature of the distinction.*"<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, there is more to the proposition *that A differs from B* than the fact that its constituents are A, B, and difference. There is also the manner in which the constituents occur. Presumably, this has something to do with the fact that the proposition *predicates* difference of A and B, and so *represents A as being different from B*. Since a list doesn't predicate anything of anything else, it isn't representational.

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<sup>2</sup> See Soames (2008a), and chapters 2 and 3 of Soames (2010b), on the failure of all attempts to justify taking theories of meaning to be either theories of unrelativized truth (*a la* Davidson), or theories truth relativized to a circumstance of evaluation (*a la* possible worlds semantics).

<sup>3</sup> Russell (1903), 49-50, my emphasis.

Is this problematic? Consider sentence (1), in which ‘difference’ and ‘identity’ are abstract nouns, ‘different’ is an adjective that combines with the copula to form a predicate, and ‘from difference’ is a prepositional phrase modifying the predicate.

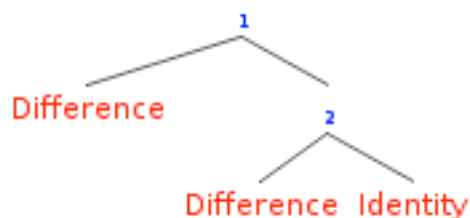
1. [S [N Difference] [VP [V is different [PP [P from] [N identity]]]]]

The constituents of the proposition expressed by (1) are the relations identity and difference, the latter occurring twice. Understanding (1) involves understanding its words, which provide the proposition’s constituents, plus understanding the hierarchical structure in which the words are arranged, which indicates what is predicated of what. Just as one who understands the sentence recognizes one expression as predicate and two others as arguments, so, it might be argued, one who entertains the proposition recognizes from its structural configuration which of its constituents is predicated of which. On this view, what distinguishes a proposition from a mere aggregate of constituents parallels what distinguishes a sentence from a mere list. The structural relations that constituents bear to one another carry the information about predication needed for representational content.

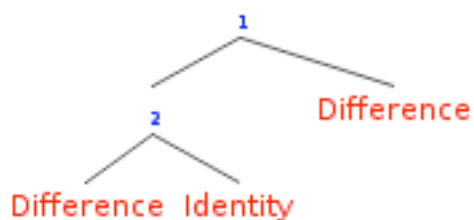
But how, exactly, does the arrangement of its constituents show that the proposition predicates difference of difference and identity? Consider some candidates for this proposition.

- 2a. < difference, <difference, identity> >
- b. { {difference}, {difference, { {difference}, {difference, identity}}}}
- c. <<identity, difference>, difference >
- d. {{{identity}, {identity, difference}}, {{ {identity}, {identity, difference}}}, difference }

3a.



3b.



Although any of these structures could serve as a formal model of the proposition expressed by (1), none could be that proposition. The proposition *represents difference as being different from identity*, because it *predicates* difference of the other two. Since there is nothing in (2), (3), or any other formal structure we might specify, which, *by its very nature*, indicates that anything is predicated of anything, such structures are neither intrinsically representational nor capable of being true or false.

We could, if we wished, *adopt* rules that would allow us to read off information about predication from the structures, and so *interpret* them. However, this would *not* make them propositions in the traditional sense. Such propositions are *not* things to which we *give meanings*. They *are* the meanings we assign to sentences, when we interpret them. The real problem with Russell's discussion is his assumption that propositions are both intrinsically representational, independent of us, and that from which the representational features of our cognitive states and sentences are inherited. Since this assumption makes it impossible to answer the question "*What makes propositions representational?*," there are no Russellian propositions.

The same conclusion holds for Fregean propositions, which are also assumed to be representational independent of us. Frege differs from Russell in postulating “unsaturated” senses that are intrinsically predicative, and so always occur in a predicative role.<sup>4</sup> Although this may sound attractive, it isn’t, since it leads him to conclude that neither the sense nor referent of any predicative expression can be designated by a non-predicative expression -- and, thereby, made the subject of a further predication. This thesis -- that if *Pred* is a predicate, then *the sense of Pred* is unsaturated, *the referent of Pred* is incomplete, and neither can be designated by any nonpredicative expression – is self-defeating, as shown by the italicized phrases used to state it.<sup>5</sup>

Since we need propositions in our linguistic and cognitive theories, the failure of traditional conceptions calls for a new conception that reverses explanatory priorities. Sentences, utterances, and cognitive states are not representational *because* of their relations to inherently representational propositions. Instead, propositions are representational *because* of their relations to inherently representational cognitive states, or independently representational sentences. On this view, representation in mind and language results from the cognitive activities of agents. There are, in the current literature, two main ways of fleshing out this idea. The first, presented in King (2007) takes the existence and representational character of propositions to be dependent on, and derived from, the priori existence and representational character of sentences that express them. The second, presented in Soames (2010a), develops a conception of propositions as contents of cognitive states generally, including perceptual cognition and prelinguistic perceptual belief, which are taken to be the basis for more complex, linguistically mediated, thought.

These views may be illustrated using (4), and the proposition it expresses.

4. [S [NP This ] [Pred [Cop is ] [Adj red]]]

The labeled bracketing displays the syntactic structure of the sentence, indicating both its constituent structure and the order in which the constituents occur. Abstracting away from details, I

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<sup>4</sup> Frege (1892b).

use ‘ $R_s$ ’ to name the relation that ‘this’ stands in to ‘red’ in (4). Since ‘this’ is an indexical, (4) expresses a proposition only relative to a possible context of utterance. Imagine a context in which ‘this’ is used to refer to  $o$ . According to King, the proposition – *that  $o$  is red* -- expressed by (4), relative to the context, is a structurally complex entity of which the semantic contents --  $o$  and the property *being red* -- of ‘this’ and ‘red’, at the context, are constituents, along with  $R_s$ . More precisely, he takes it to be the fact designated by (4F).

4F. the fact that *there is a possible context  $C$  and expressions  $a$  and  $b$  of some language  $L$  such that (i) some sentence  $S$  of  $L$  consists of  $a$ 's bearing  $R_s$  to  $b$ , (ii)  $o$  is the semantic content of  $a$  in  $C$ , and the property being red is the semantic content of  $b$  in  $C$ , and (iii) in  $L$  the relation  $R_s$  encodes the instantiation function (which is to say that sentences formed by placing an expression  $\alpha$  in the relation  $R_s$  to an expression  $\beta$  are true, at a context iff the referent of  $\alpha$  at the context instantiates the referent of  $\beta$  at the context).*

Although this may seem like a mouthful, the idea is simple. Propositions are what sentences with the same semantic content have in common – the contents of their constituents, plus a common syntactic structure, the semantic contribution of which is the same for each sentence. It is a feature of English that, when a term  $\alpha$  stands in  $R_s$  to an adjective  $\beta$  the property designated by  $\beta$  is predicated of the referent of  $\alpha$ , which means that the sentence is true iff the referent instantiates the property. Thus, the syntax and semantics of English, plus the existence of (4) and the relevant context  $C$ , guarantee the truth of the italicized clause in (4F). King takes this to mean that (4F) designates *a fact*, which is the proposition (4) expresses. Thus, the existence of the proposition *that  $o$  is red* is guaranteed by the semantic properties of (4), relative to  $C$ . To get the same result for any sentence  $S$  and context  $C^*$ , for which the semantic properties of  $S$  at  $C^*$  match those of (4) at  $C$ , King quantifies over all possible contexts, and every sentence of every language, thereby arriving at the complex general fact which, in his view, is the simple proposition *that  $o$  is red*.

For King, as for the early Russell, the fact *that  $a$  is  $F$*  is a complex entity that consists of  $a$ 's actually instantiating  $F$ -hood. As Russell observed, the proposition *that  $a$  is  $F$*  can't be that fact, for, if it were, its very existence would guarantee its truth. King avoids this absurdity by taking the proposition to be the fact *that  $a$   $R_p$   $F$ -hood* -- where  $R_p$  is the relation expressed by the formula that

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<sup>5</sup> This is Frege's problem "the concept horse is not a concept." See chapter 2 of Soames (2010a).

results from replacing the underlined occurrences of ‘*o*’ and ‘*the property being red*’ in the italicized part of (4F) with a pair of variables. Thus, he solves Russell’s problem of explaining what “holds together” the constituents of the proposition -- they are held together by the fact that  $R_p$  *actually relates them* – while avoiding the absurd result that in order to exist a proposition must be true.<sup>6</sup>

Although this view has several desirable features, it also faces problems and challenges of various kinds. The first is that the value of guaranteeing the existence of propositions must be discounted by the price of the commitments required to obtain it. Positing the existence of facts -- thought of not as true propositions (as they sometimes are), but as separate, discrete truthmakers correspondence with which make various and sundry truths true – brings with it a host of philosophical worries that are themselves potential sources of skepticism.<sup>7</sup> Possibilia are also worrisome. For King, propositional facts involve quantification over possible contexts, which include merely possible world-states as constituents. But if the analysis of propositions appeals to a conceptually prior notion of possible world-states, it would seem that the analysis of such states can’t appeal to a conceptually prior notion of propositions. This is problematic, since analyses of propositions either as sets of propositions, or as properties of making sets of basic world-describing propositions true, are among the more attractive analyses of world-states.<sup>8</sup>

King’s commitment to actualism – which allows reference to, and quantification over, only things that actually exist – brings further worries. On his analysis, in order for any proposition to exist, all possible world-states – conceived of as maximal properties that the universe fails to instantiate – must also exist. Although the existence of some uninstantiated properties is unproblematic, the existence of uninstantiated properties involving particular individuals – e.g., *being identical with, or distinct from, o* -- seems to require the existence of those individuals. If, as I believe, possible world-states are properties of this sort, their actual existence will, on King’s view,

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<sup>6</sup> See Russell (1910-11) and chapter 4 of Soames (2010a).

<sup>7</sup> See Merricks (2007) and Soames (2008b).

<sup>8</sup> See Adams (1974), Soames (2007), and chapter 5 of Soames (2010b).

require the actual existence of all possible objects. Although he is clearly open to this, he takes no definite stand on it, leaving it open how merely possible objects are represented by possible world-states.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the existence of propositions is held hostage to the fortune highly contentious metaphysical claims.

Difficulties mount when one moves beyond the philosophical cost of King's solution to traditional problems about propositions, and focuses on the problems to be solved. The chief problem confronting traditional accounts of structured propositions isn't "What holds their constituents together?", but "What accounts for the fact that they represent the world, and so have truth conditions?" Even if we suppose that clause (4F) designates a complex fact  $F_4$ , simply noting  $F_4$ 's existence provides no hint that *it* has truth conditions at all, let alone that it is true iff *o* is red. To be sure, if it exists, then some sentence *S* of some language and some possible context *C* are such that *S* is true at *C* iff *o* is red. But from this we can't even conclude that it makes sense to attribute truth conditions to facts, let alone that  $F_4$  has the truth conditions claimed for it.

King realizes this, and responds essentially as follows: In and of itself,  $F_4$  isn't a proposition, and doesn't have truth conditions. However, it becomes a proposition for us, and acquires truth conditions, if we interpret it in a certain way. He sees  $F_4$  as a complex consisting in *o*'s standing in the two-place relation  $R_p$  (defined above) to *the property being red* -- though, of course,  $F_4$  could equally well be taken to be the holding of either (i) a three-place relation  $R_{p,3}$  uniting *o* and  $R_S$ , and the property *being red*, (ii) a two-place relation  $R_{p2-red}$  uniting *o* and  $R_S$ , or (iii) a two-place relation  $R_{p2-o}$  uniting  $R_S$  and the property *being red*. (All of these relations, plus King's preferred  $R_p$ , are equally definable from (4F)). When  $F_4$  is viewed in the way King prefers -- as relating *o* to *being red* by means of  $R_p$  -- it can be seen as taking on truth conditions, *provided that*  $R_p$  *is viewed as (in his words) "inheriting the semantic significance of  $R_S$ ."* The idea, as I would express it, is this: just as we treat the syntactic relation  $R_S$  in sentence (4) as *predicating* the property designated by its second argument of the entity designated by its first argument, so we can come to treat the propositional relation  $R_p$  as *predicating* the property which is its second argument

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<sup>9</sup> King (2007), 42-44, 57, 84.

of the individual which is its first argument. To do so is, for King, to endow the previously non-intentional  $F_4$  with truth conditions.

King believes that this is what English speakers do.<sup>10</sup> According to him, there was a time -- before English contained propositional attitude verbs, ‘that’-clauses, or modal operators -- when it did contain simple sentences like (4), as well, presumably, as truth-functional compounds and quantified sentences. At this time, sentences were used in cognition and communication, words and phrases had semantic contents, and sentences had truth conditions. However, no propositions yet existed. Although the fact  $F_4$  existed, it was not yet a proposition, because no need had yet arisen to assign semantic significance to the relation  $R_p$  [or, I assume, to think of  $F_4$  in terms of  $R_p$  as opposed to other relations in terms of which it could equally well be analyzed]. However, when the need to report cognitive states was felt, it became clear that some way of viewing sentences and cognitive states as sharing representational contents had to be found. At this point, speakers became aware of  $F_4$ , began viewing it in terms of the relation  $R_p$ , and implicitly began assigning it a semantic significance inherited from sentence (4) and the syntactic relation  $R_s$ . Thus it came to pass that Man created propositions.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to being uncomfortably speculative, this account embodies a troubling internal tension. On one hand, we are told that the existence of propositions is dependent on the *prior* existence of language, and the complex cognitive and communicative practices of those who speak it. We are asked to believe that prior to the existence of propositions, speakers used language to think and communicate – which one would have thought involved (i) using certain expressions with the intention that they refer to specific things, (ii) using other expressions with the intention that they were to be predicated of those things, (iii) using sentences to assert certain things, and express

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>11</sup> Since English contains both [the fact that S] and [the proposition that S] which for King designate different complex entities, presumably he regards ‘that’-clauses in English as systematically ambiguous between the readings they bear in e.g., [Pam regrets (the fact) that S] and [Pam believes (the claim/proposition) that S]. However, he doesn’t explain how this ambiguity comes about, or where it fits into his history of the pre-history of English. Nor does he give an account of seemingly straightforward cases like, “Pam regrets *that she is pregnant*. Although her parents don’t realize *it* yet, in time they will come to believe *it*.” Here, something regretted – presumably a fact – is

specific beliefs, and (iv) being confident that one's hearers could recognize one's intentions, assertions, and beliefs. On the other hand, we are told that belief, assertion, intention, and the like are attitudes agents bear to propositions, which did not then exist. From this it follows that the extensive and sophisticated language use that occurred in the pre-propositional age involved agents who never intended, believed, or asserted anything. How could that be? King's answer posits "proto-intentional states," as primitive precursors of genuine intentional states, which he sees as both shared with us by animals, and sufficient for the genesis and development of the pre-propositional language of our "proto-linguistic ancestors."<sup>12</sup> But this is unconvincing. Whatever these "proto-intentional states" are, they can't themselves be representational, or have truth conditions, lest they raise the same problems as propositions. Thus, it remains mysterious how the sentences that must, on King's view, have arisen from them could themselves be representational, or have truth conditions.

A further, closely connected, question is "What is to entertain the facts with which propositions are identified?" King says very little about this.<sup>13</sup> All that can be determined from his discussion is that once propositions come into existence, a speaker of a language L that contains proposition-requiring constructions (e.g., attitude verbs, certain 'that'-clauses, and modal operators) will be able to entertain propositions by understanding sentences of L. What we are *not* given is any language-independent way of entertaining, or bearing other cognitive attitudes toward, propositions. Surely, however, we want an account of propositions as contents of perceptual experience, and objects of non-linguistic perceptually based beliefs – as well as a story of the role of propositions in imagination and other intentional states. It is hard to see how this will be forthcoming from an analysis of propositions exclusively based on language.

With this in mind, I turn to a second attempt to naturalize propositions and ground their intentionality in the intentionality of the cognitive states of agents. Like King's approach, it applies

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described as something that will eventually be believed – presumably a proposition. How, given King's account of the sharp difference between the two, can that be?

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

to propositions expressed by sentences. Unlike his approach, it is not centered in language, but applies to intentional cognitive states generally. This approach will be presented in two stages, as it is (in much greater detail) in Soames (2010a). The first *deflationary stage* attempts to provide what is needed to play the role of propositions in our cognitive and linguistic theories, with minimal metaphysical, or otherwise contentious, philosophical commitments. After pushing this approach as far as possible, I will sketch the second, *cognitive-realist stage*, which goes beyond the limits of the first stage, while attempting to retain most of its virtues.

Both approaches recognize propositions as central to linguistic and non-linguistic cognition alike. According to both, one who sees an object *o as red* predicates redness it. Since one's perceptual experience represents *o as being red*, one bears a propositional attitude to the proposition *that o is red*. Attitudes like this, as well perceptual beliefs to which they give rise, are often not linguistically mediated. The same is true of much, but not all, of our thought. Language learning changes our cognitive calculus by expanding our cognitive reach.<sup>14</sup> In making objects and properties with which we have had no prior acquaintance cognitively available to us, as well as providing a linguistic means of predicating one of the other, language vastly increases our stock of beliefs, and other attitudes. As a result, we come to bear attitudes to many propositions to which our only cognitive access is mediated by sentences that express them. Because of this, language is not merely a means of encoding and communicating prior, independent, thought; it is also a fertile source of new thought. Nevertheless, the explanatory model for understanding linguistic meaning is one that applies to cognitive states in their full generality, including the nonlinguistic.

On the deflationary conception, propositions are structured complexes constructed out of, or encoding, the semantic contents of the constituents of sentences that express them. As before, I use a system of labeled bracketing to provide representative structures. Whatever the right syntax for a language turns out to be, all semantically significant aspects of syntactic structure must be encoded by the deflationary propositions its sentences express. Presumably, if there is one system of

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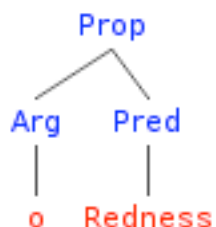
<sup>13</sup> See, however, p. 52.

semantic structures meeting this condition, there will be many. For any unambiguous sentence  $S$ , each such system identifies a unique structure as *the proposition  $S$  expresses*. However, since several systems may be equally good, several formal structures may be equally good candidates for being that proposition.

To entertain a simple proposition is to predicate something of something else. For example, to entertain the proposition *that  $o$  is red* is to predicate redness of  $o$ . Although, like negation, predication is a primitive notion, it is easily illustrated. When we see an object  $o$  *as red*, we predicate redness of it, and so entertain the proposition *that  $o$  is red*. We also predicate redness of  $o$ , and hence entertain this proposition, when we form the perceptual *belief* that  $o$  is red. We do the same when we understand an utterance of ‘This is red’, taking the predicate to express the property redness and the subject to refer to  $o$ .

The proposition entertained in these ways may be identified with (4D).

4D.  $[_{\text{Prop}} [_{\text{Arg}} o] [_{\text{Pred}} \text{Redness}]]$



Structures like these are the theorist’s creations. The theorist *stipulates* that to entertain (4D) is to predicate redness of  $o$ , thereby assigning a new, technical meaning to the verb ‘entertain’ that explains what is meant by the theoretical claim that an agent entertains this structure. Next, the theorist advances (5a), which relates that claim to the ordinary claim on its left.

5a. An agent entertains the proposition that  $o$  is red iff the agent entertains (4D).

A similar strategy is used for every propositional attitude. Since to entertain the proposition *that  $o$  is red* is to predicate redness of  $o$ , and since this predication is included in every attitude with that content, entertaining the proposition is one component of any attitude we bear to it. To *believe* that  $o$  is red is to predicate redness of  $o$ , while endorsing that predication. To *know* that  $o$  is red is,

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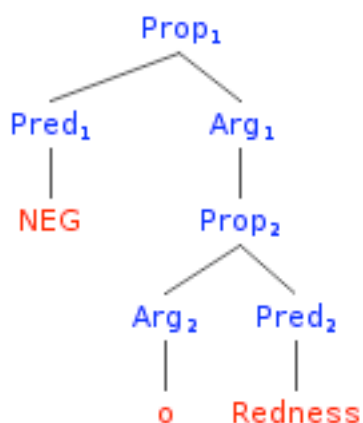
<sup>14</sup> Soames (1989).

roughly, to believe that *o* is red, while being justified in so doing. To *assert* that *o* is red is to make a conversational commitment, by assertively uttering something, to treat the proposition *that o is red* as something one knows. Given these characterizations, the theorist adds (5b-d) to (5a), thereby generating empirical predictions relating the theoretical claims on the right to ordinary attitude ascriptions on the left.

- 5b. An agent believes the proposition that *o* is red iff the agent believes (4D).
- c. An agent knows that *o* is red iff the agent knows (4D).
- d. An agent asserts that *o* is red iff the agent asserts (4D).

More complex propositions are treated similarly. For example, to entertain the proposition *that it is not the case that o is red*, represented by (6), is (i), to predicate redness of *o*, and thereby to entertain (4D), and (ii), to predicate *not being true* of (4), by, in effect, saying to oneself, “That’s not true,” referring to the result of one’s initial predication.

6.  $[_{\text{Prop}}[_{\text{Pred}} \text{NEG}][_{\text{Arg}} [_{\text{Pron}} [_{\text{Arg}} \text{o}][_{\text{Pred}} \text{Redness}]]]]$



Entertaining other, more complex, propositions involves further, more complex, sequences of cognitive acts.<sup>15</sup>

This approach depends on (i) the inclusion of information about what is predicated of what in abstract structures playing the role of propositions, (ii) the deflationary conception of what it is to bear cognitive attitudes to these structures, and (iii) their status as representational bearers of truth conditions in virtue of what is required to entertain them. What makes (4D) represent *o* as red is that predicating its Pred-constituent of its Arg-constituent is necessary and sufficient for

entertaining it. It is in virtue of this that we speak of (4D) as predicating redness of *o* (whether or not anyone actually entertains it). Since a proposition that does this is true (at *w*) iff *o* is red (at *w*), the truth conditions of (4D), which don't change from world-state to world-state, are derived from what it predicates of what.

On this approach, the function of propositions in our theories is to identify and track the cognitive states of agents. In physical theory we use numbers, and other abstract objects, to specify relations that physical magnitudes bear to one another. In semantic and cognitive theory we use abstract propositional structures to talk about the relations that representational cognitive states bear to one another, and to the world. The conditions the theory specifies as necessary and sufficient for entertaining these structures are what allow us to use them to track the relations that hold among actual and possible predications by agents. This provides us with a sense in which the truth conditions of propositions are essential to them. What is essential to the use to which we put propositions is the range of actual and possible predications they track. Since these predications are essentially representational, that which tracks them is too.

Although one can get considerable mileage out of this approach, one may wonder whether propositions, regarded as merely useful tracking devices, are real objects of agents' attitudes. If the cognitive states being tracked are the only realities we are concerned with, such propositions may be nothing more than theoretically useful fictions. This is particularly worrying when one recalls that, according to the theory, entertaining a compound structure like (6) requires agents to first refer to, and then predicate untruth of, *the result of their predicating redness of o* – which is identified with (4D). It is not clear how this can happen, if such propositional structures are the theorist's own creations.

This worry motivates a transition from a deflationary, instrumentalist approach to a genuine *cognitive realist* approach. Since propositions are needed to track cognitive acts, why not take them to be *event types* instances of which involve those very acts? On this proposal, the proposition *that o is red* is identified, not with the tree structure (4D), but with the event type in which an agent

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<sup>15</sup> See chapter 5 of Soames (2010a).

*predicates redness of o*. In this way, it is intrinsically connected to the cognitive acts it is needed to track. It is also something to which all agents who entertain it bear the same, natural, relation. This analysis provides an account of what propositions *really are*, rather than merely choosing abstract structures, about which there is bound to be some arbitrariness, to *play the role of propositions*.

Consider a spoken utterance of ‘Snow is white’, thought of as both an event that occurs at a particular time and place, and a token of the sentence uttered. So construed, sentences are event-types that can have multiple occurrences, which are their tokens.<sup>16</sup> Next imagine an utterance of the sentence followed by an utterance of “That’s true.” In such a case, the demonstrative may refer either to the utterance, or to the sentence uttered – illustrating that some event types can be bearers of truth value. Finally, there are events in which one doesn’t utter anything, but simply thinks of snow as white, thereby predicating whiteness of it. These cognitions are events that occur at particular times and places, which are instances of the corresponding event type in which an agent predicates whiteness of snow. Just as the sentence ‘Snow is white’ can be identified with the event type of which utterances of it are instances, so *the proposition that snow is white* can be identified with the event type of which particular cases of predicating whiteness of snow are instances. Thus, both event types have truth conditions.

In addition to bearing their truth conditions intrinsically, propositions-*cum*-event-types are things with which we are acquainted. Since the proposition *that o is red* is the event type in which one predicates redness of *o*, and since every attitude one bears to this proposition involves this predication, any agent acquainted with his own cognitive processes – in the sense of being able to make them objects of thought -- will be similarly acquainted with the proposition *that o is red*, by virtue of being acquainted with events in his cognitive life that are instances of it (and noting their similarity). Given the means both of thinking of *o* as red, and of becoming aware of so doing, one can then make further predications about the content of one’s thought. If, after one predicates redness of snow, one says to oneself, “That’s not true,” one thereby predicates untruth of the

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<sup>16</sup> The picture is complicated by the fact that some sentence tokens are utterances, while others are inscriptions. Perhaps sentence types should be understood disjunctively.

proposition that is the type of cognitive event one has just brought about. This illustrates how agents are able to entertain compound propositions by predicating properties of their constituent propositions – which was the bane of the deflationary approach.

In this way, the cognitive-realist theory inherits the virtues of the deflationary theory, without its anti-realist worries. Like the deflationary account, it provides entities needed as contents of sentences, bearers of truth, and objects of the attitudes. But while the deflationary account sees nothing beyond the unavoidably arbitrary formal structures -- like (4D) and (6) -- that play the role of propositions in our theories, the realist account views such structures as merely useful devices that *represent* the real propositions to which agents bear natural cognitive relations. The labeled trees provided by linguistic and cognitive theories encode the structure and sequence of cognitive acts that are necessary and sufficient for entertaining the real propositions these structures represent – where entertaining a proposition is performing the acts involved in tokening the event-type that it is.

This account addresses the most vexing problems to which traditional propositions give rise. Unlike the Platonic epistemology traditionally required, the cognitive-realist account takes knowledge of propositions to be knowledge of events that make up one's cognitive life. It also avoids the pseudo-problem of “the unity of the proposition,” which -- though usually posed as that of explaining how the constituents of propositions “hold together” -- serves to mask the real problem of explaining how propositions can be representational, and so have truth conditions. The traditional view makes this problem insoluble by taking the representational nature of propositions to be intrinsic, unanalyzable, and independent of us. By locating the representational character of propositions in their intrinsic connection to inherently representational cognitive events, the cognitive-realist account offers a solution.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See chapters 6 and 7 of Soames (2010) for remaining challenges, and suggestions for overcoming them.

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