Scott Soames, *Beyond Rigidity: The Unfinished Semantic Agenda of Naming and Necessity*

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The two items of unfinished business to which Scott Soames addresses himself in this excellent and important book are (i) a positive theory of the semantic contents of proper names, and (ii) an extension of Saul Kripke’s semantic theses about names to natural kind terms. In *Naming and Necessity* Kripke argued that names are not synonymous with definite descriptions or clusters of descriptions but he was conspicuously silent on exactly what the semantic contents of names are supposed to be. In Lecture III Kripke extended his notion of rigid designation to natural kind terms such as *gold*, *tiger*, *light*, *hot* and *water* and he argued that these terms are not synonymous with the descriptions associated with them by speakers. But because Kripke characterizes rigid designation primarily for singular terms—a singular term is rigid if it designates the same individual in every possible world in which that individual exists—it is not clear what to make of the claim that a general term like *water* is a rigid designator. Related Kripkean theses about the modal and epistemic statuses of identity statements involving natural kind terms, e.g. *Water is H₂O*, are similarly unclear. With his characteristic ingenuity and precision Soames advances the discussion on both names and natural kind terms. In this study I will focus on the first of these two topics. All of my critical remarks will be concerned in one way or another with Soames’s views on names. Towards the end I will give a very brief summary of Soames’s views on natural kind terms.

**Proper Names and Semantic Content**

Anyone familiar with Soames’s previous work will know that his positive account of names is Millian—he argues that the meanings of most
linguistically simple proper names are simply their referents. One of the most
important parts of this book is the general account of semantic content from
which this Millian account of names is derived. Soames’s view is (roughly) that
the semantic content of a noncontext-sensitive, unambiguous sentence s is the
information a competent speaker would assert and convey in any normal
context in which s is used (62–3). It will be useful for what follows to have
the exact statement of Soames’s account, which is labeled “SC2” in the book.
SC2 refers back to a previous principle labeled “C+”. Here they are:

C+. A proposition p is semantically expressed by s only if p is included in the
information a competent speaker would assert and intend to convey by an
assertive utterance of s in any context c in which s is used with its literal
meaning by conversational participants who understand s, provided that (i) s is
not used metaphorically, ironically or sarcastically in c, and (ii) the presumption
that the speaker intends to commit himself or herself to p is not defeated by a
conversational implicature to the contrary. (60)

SC2. A proposition p is the proposition semantically expressed by a sentence s if
and only if (i) p satisfies C+, and (ii) for any other proposition q satisfying (i), the
fact that p satisfies (i), explains why q does so as well, and not vice versa. (62)

As indicated by C+, by “normal context” Soames means to exclude cases of
metaphor, irony, sarcasm, and other varieties of non-literality, as well as
cases in which a conversational implicature rules it out that the speaker has
asserted certain information that otherwise would have been asserted (see
discourse (7), 118, for an example of this). Condition (ii) in SC2 is meant to
rule out the consequence that, e.g., the proposition that someone was fond
of dogs is the semantic content of Aristotle was fond of dogs, or that the
proposition that Sam is at work is the semantic content of Sam is at work
and Susan is at the market.

Now consider any normal context in which a competent speaker uses the
sentence Aristotle was fond of dogs. In some of these contexts the speaker
will assert and convey that the greatest pupil of Plato was fond of dogs, in
others that the teacher of Alexander the Great was fond of dogs, and in
others some other general propositions. But there is no general proposition
running through all of these contexts that a speaker would assert and intend
to convey. Given any particular general proposition, it is not hard to think
of contexts in which a speaker would not assert or intend to convey that
proposition by uttering Aristotle was fond of dogs. We are thus led to
conclude that no general proposition is the semantic content of the sentence
Aristotle was fond of dogs.

So far this supports Kripke’s negative conclusions against descriptivism
about names. Soames goes a step further and uses this account to argue that
the semantic content of Aristotle was fond of dogs is the singular Russellian
proposition consisting of Aristotle and the property of being fond of dogs.
At this stage Soames introduces an account of the competency conditions for proper names. The idea is that if a speaker is competent with the name *Aristotle* then (i) she must have a referential intention that determines Aristotle as the referent of *Aristotle*, and (ii) she must realize that to assertively utter *Aristotle is F* is to say of Aristotle that he is F (65). These two conditions ensure that when a competent speaker utters *Aristotle was fond of dogs*, and the conditions are normal, the speaker asserts and intends to convey of Aristotle that he was fond of dogs. In other words, in any normal context a competent speaker who uses this sentence will assert and intend to convey the singular Russellian proposition that Aristotle was fond of dogs. By SC2, it follows that this Russellian proposition is the semantic content of *Aristotle was fond of dogs*, and from this it is a short step, via compositionality considerations, to the Millian conclusion that Aristotle himself is the semantic content of *Aristotle*.

This argument is ingenious, but it cannot go unchallenged. The problem is with SC2. Soames arrives at SC2 by reflection on the concept of semantic content. His intention is not to define this concept, but to draw a connection between it and the concepts of asserting and conveying information: *I am not* claiming that the notions of asserting and conveying information are conceptually prior to the semantic notions, or that they can be used to define the semantic notions. Principles C+, SC1, and SC2 are *not* definitions. Rather, their function is to connect certain semantic notions with certain pragmatic notions so that intuitions about each can be brought to bear on hypotheses about the other. (63, Soames’s emphasis)

But even if SC2 is not a definition of semantic content, Soames still intends it to be a conceptual truth about semantic content. This means that SC2 carries a very strong modal commitment: it rules out as impossible cases in which competent speakers invariably assert and convey a proposition p by uttering s (where that is not explained by their invariably asserting some other proposition), and in which p is not, or is not part of, the semantic content of s. Now consider the following:

1. To be competent with the names *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus* one must associate *Hesperus* with the property of being the first heavenly body visible in the evening and *Phosphorus* with the property of being the first heavenly body visible in the morning.7
2. Assertively uttering *Hesperus is a planet* requires asserting of Venus that it is a planet and, because of (1), also requires asserting that the first heavenly body visible in the evening is a planet.
3. The truth-conditions for *Hesperus is a planet* are just that Venus is a planet, i.e. *Hesperus is a planet* is true at world w iff Venus is a planet at w.
In a world in which (1)–(3) hold competent speakers would invariably assert, *inter alia*, that the first heavenly body visible in the evening is a planet by assertive utterances of *Hesperus is a planet*. But because of (3), this proposition would not be part of the semantic content of *Hesperus is a planet*. Thus, a possible world in which (1)–(3) hold is a counterexample to SC2. By adopting SC2 Soames is committed to saying that there is no such possible world. But clearly there is. The conditions (1)–(3) would all hold in a world in which (1) and (2) are true and in which *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus* are rigid designators of Venus. What is impossible about that?

Soames might argue that competency, assertion and semantic content are inherently relational notions, i.e. competency is always competency-with-L, for some language L, and similarly for assertion and semantic content. Soames argues in chapter 5 that competency-with-English does not require associating the names *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus* with any descriptions or properties (129). So whatever is true of a world in which (1)–(3) hold, it is not the case that speakers there are competent-with-English. They must be competent with some other language, English* say. These speakers are making assertions-in-English*, and their sentences have semantic-content-in-English*. But SC2 is about what we mean by the words *assertion* and *semantic content*, which is assertion-in-English and semantic-content-in-English. Hence, a world in which (1)–(3) hold is simply irrelevant to SC2.

There are two problems with this line of response. The first is that it involves an implausible method of individuating languages. Common sense does not hold that localized changes in the meanings or competency conditions for individual words lead to the wholesale replacement of one language by another. We think that there has been one language, English, that has undergone numerous changes in the meanings of various individual words and expressions over time. This is not the succession of different languages one after the other. What holds for times should also hold for possible worlds. It is perfectly natural to say that in a world in which (1)–(3) hold the speakers are speaking English, just that English is slightly different than it is in the actual world. So it could be that competence-with-English requires asserting-in-English a proposition that is not part of the semantic-content-in-English of the sentence uttered. Second, even if we go against common sense in the way we individuate languages, the counterexample to SC2 still applies. SC2 is not, after all, simply a claim about semantic-content-in-English. It is a claim about semantic-content-in-L for variable L. If by uttering a sentence s of English*, speakers who are competent-with-English* invariably assert-in-English* a proposition p that is not part of the semantic-content-in-English* of s then we have a counterexample to SC2. This brings out just how strong a claim SC2 is making. If SC2 were true, there could not be a language in which competence requires asserting a proposition with a sentence that is not part of the semantic content of
that sentence. The possibility of a language characterized by (1)–(3) shows that this is wrong.

Another way for Soames to respond is suggested by his detailed discussion of *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus* in chapter 5 (120–30). There he considers, and ultimately rejects, the view that *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus* are “partially descriptive names” that satisfy what he calls the “Alternative Theory of Partially Descriptive Names” (124–5). The details of this view are different from those contained in (1)–(3). The differences have to do with exactly what gets asserted by an assertive utterance of *Hesperus is a planet.* Without getting into the details, it is enough for us to note that Soames’s discussion suggests a way to avoid the present counterexample to SC2. Soames could save SC2 by arguing that in a world in which (1)–(3) all hold the semantic content of *Hesperus is a planet* would include both the singular proposition that Venus is a planet and the proposition that the first heavenly body visible in the evening is a planet, but only the first of these two propositions determines the truth-conditions of this sentence. Even though competent speakers invariably assert both of these propositions by uttering *Hesperus is a planet,* and both propositions comprise the semantic content of this sentence, only the first proposition is relevant to its truth-conditions.

The problem with this strategy is that it drives too thick a wedge between semantic content and truth-conditions. If we allow that there can be propositions in the semantic content of a sentence that are irrelevant to truth-conditions then we will lose the one clear test we have for sameness and difference of semantic content, which is that if two sentences have different truth-conditions then they have different semantic contents. For example, from the fact that *a is F* is true iff *a is F,* and *b is G* is true iff *b is G,* it would not follow that *a is F* and *b is G* have different contents. It could be that both have the same content, which consists of the propositions that *a is F* and that *b is G,* but the second of these is irrelevant to the truth-conditions of *a is F* and the first is irrelevant to the truth-conditions of *b is G.* No account of semantic content should allow this possibility, and so I think this way of avoiding the counterexample is closed off to Soames. Soames says that the view that *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus* are partially descriptive names that satisfy the Alternative Theory “appears to be nothing more than an ad hoc attempt to reconcile conflicting claims about sentences containing names like *Hesperus and Phosphorus*” (127). Something similar could be said about the present proposal for reconciling (1)–(3) with SC2.

Another counterexample to SC2 can be found in the neighborhood of Grice’s notion of conventional implicature. According to Grice, when a speaker utters *p; therefore q* she asserts *p* and *q* and implicates that *q* is a consequence of *p.* The implication is conventional because it is the result of the conventions attaching to the word *therefore* and not the result of particular features of the conversational context. The information that
speakers conventionally implicate with a sentence does not affect the truth-conditions of that sentence, and is not part of the semantic content of that sentence. So the sentence $p; \text{therefore } q$ is true if and only if $p$ and $q$, and has the semantic content that $p$ and $q$, even though normal utterances of this sentence will implicate that $q$ is a consequence of $p$. As Soames explains (58), this is not a problem for SC2 because implication does not require assertion, and so there will be cases in which a competent speaker assertively utters $p; \text{therefore } q$ in a normal context and does not assert that $q$ is a consequence of $p$.

It would be a problem for SC2, however, if competent speakers invariably asserted both that $p$ and $q$ and that $q$ is a consequence of $p$ when uttering $p; \text{therefore } q$, and the truth-conditions of this sentence remain simply that $p$ and $q$. In that case the proposition that $q$ is a consequence of $p$ would be invariably asserted by competent speakers but it would not be part of the semantic content of $p; \text{therefore } q$. Surely it is possible for this to be the case. If so, we have another counterexample to SC2. Similar examples can be generated using cases of generalized conversational implicature, e.g. utterances of $X$ went into a house yesterday and found a tortoise inside the front door implicate that the house was not $X$’s, and scalar implicatures, e.g. utterances of He likes some cats implicate that he likes some, but not all, cats.10

A third case is suggested by something Soames says about the sentence Red is a color. “To say of a kind that it has this property is, at least in part, to say that predicating the kind of an individual concrete object involves saying of that object that it is colored” (290). The idea seems to be that when a competent speaker assertively utters Red is a color she asserts two propositions: the proposition that red is a color, and the proposition that saying that something is red involves saying that it is colored. Suppose Soames is right about this. Surely, though, the semantic content of Red is a color does not include the second of these two propositions. Red is a color is true if and only if red is a color, regardless of whether or not saying that something is red involves saying that it is colored. So if Soames is right we have a counterexample that holds in the actual world.

Soames could respond that the second of these two propositions does not satisfy condition (ii) of SC2. That is, he could say that the reason competent speakers invariably assert the proposition that saying that something is red involves saying that it is colored is explained by the fact that they invariantly assert the proposition that red is a color. But why this should be so is unclear. The other cases of propositions that fail to satisfy condition (ii) are ones in which those propositions are obvious logical consequences of the propositions that do satisfy this condition. For example, the proposition that someone was fond of dogs fails to satisfy condition (ii) for the sentence Aristotle was fond of dogs. This is because the reason competent speakers invariably assert this proposition when uttering this sentence (assuming they
do) is that this proposition is an obvious consequence of another proposition that they invariably assert with this sentence, i.e. the proposition that Aristotle was fond of dogs. But the proposition that saying that something is red involves saying that it is colored is not a consequence, much less an obvious consequence, of the proposition that red is a color. Hence, it is not at all clear that the reason competent speakers invariably assert the former proposition by uttering *Red is a color* is that they invariably assert the latter. At the very least we would need an argument from Soames for this.

These three counterexamples bring out the underlying problem for SC2, which is that it draws a connection between the concepts of assertion and semantic content that is not there. The concept of semantic content is the concept of the content of a sentence that is a projection of its syntax. The semantic content of a sentence is determined by the contents of the words in the sentence and the way those words are put together. On the other hand, what a speaker asserts by uttering a sentence in a context is determined by the speaker’s communicative intentions. If the speaker is competent and the context is normal (in Soames’s sense) then the speaker will intend to assert the semantic content of the sentence uttered. In a sense, the meaning of a sentence controls the speaker’s communicative intentions. When the speaker is competent and speaking literally she must intend to assert the semantic content of the sentence she utters. But a speaker can intend to assert more than the semantic content of the sentence she utters, and she may even be required to do so by facts about competence. This is what happens in the examples I gave above. If SC2 were true then these examples would be incoherent or impossible. Because they are not impossible, SC2 is false and Soames’s argument is unsound.

Finally, Soames might try to avoid these problems by giving up the idea that SC2 is a conceptual truth. He could hold instead that SC2 is a contingent, empirical generalization about sentences, propositions, normal contexts, and competent speakers. But then we are left with no reason for thinking that this generalization is true, and moreover, one of Soames’s own examples, *Red is a color*, suggests that it is false.

### The Subject Matter of Semantics

Another striking and important feature of this book is the conception of semantics in which Soames sets his views on proper names. A long-standing problem in the philosophy of language has been to explain what a theory of meaning is a theory of. This is a roundabout way of approaching the general question of meaning, i.e. the question of what it is for words and sentences to have meanings. A theory of meaning is concerned with facts about the meanings of words and sentences. Presumably, if we understand what a theory of meaning is about then we will understand these facts.
According to one familiar view, semantics is about what competent speakers know about meaning. The idea is that linguistically competent speakers know a body of principles or rules about the semantic properties of words, phrases and sentences. A theory of meaning is a theory of these semantic principles that partly constitute knowledge of language. This conception of semantics is part of Chomsky’s overall “cognitivist perspective” on the study of language—although Chomsky’s own remarks on this subject are often misleading, as when he says that the cognitive perspective “regards behavior and its products not as the objects of inquiry, but as data that may provide evidence about the inner mechanisms that enter into thought and action.” The talk about “inner mechanisms” suggests that semantics is the study of the physiological state of the speaker that accounts for her semantic competence. That would be a misunderstanding. On the cognitivist conception, semantics is the study of what the speaker knows, not how she knows it. Its aim is to articulate the rules or principles that speakers know and put to use in speaking a language.

Most philosophers and linguists working in this tradition take, with Davidson, a truth-conditional approach to semantics. On this view, the rules or principles that competent speakers know constitute a theory of truth-conditions for the language. A theory of meaning is thus a theory of truth-conditions. Philosophical illumination about the nature of meaning comes from our prior grasp of the concept of truth. What is it for a sentence to have a particular meaning? It is for that sentence to have certain truth-conditions. And the knowledge that underwrites semantic competence is knowledge of truth-conditions.

Soames rejects this familiar conception of semantics. In previous papers he has argued vigorously against the view that theories of truth-conditions can serve as theories of semantic knowledge. In this book he appears to take aim at the cognitivist approach more generally. For Soames, “semantic claims about the expressions of a language are not claims about the individual psychologies, or states of mind, of language users; rather they are social claims about the conventions and commonalities found in a linguistic community” (71). This remark, and many others throughout the book in which Soames ties semantic claims to the propositions invariantly asserted across contexts, show, I think, that one of Soames’s goals in writing this book was to fill out his positive conception of semantics and thereby present an alternative to the Chomskyan, cognitivist conception. His positive conception is contained, essentially, in SC2, his account of semantic content. Soames’s view has always been that the job of a semantic theory is to give an account of the propositions semantically expressed by sentences relative to contexts. Here he gives us a way of zeroing in on these propositions—they are the propositions that are invariantly asserted and conveyed by competent speakers in normal contexts.
Soames does not argue explicitly against the cognitivist account of semantics. Rather, he gives an argument that is targeted at “a faulty conception of what it is to understand a sentence, and of how propositions that are not semantically expressed by a sentence end up being communicated by an utterance of the sentence in a context” (69). According to this conception, when presented with a sentence a hearer first computes the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence using her internalized semantic theory. This is the proposition that the speaker has asserted in the context. Then the hearer computes the other propositions that the speaker has pragmatically conveyed by combining the semantic content of the sentence with her background knowledge and beliefs, Gricean conversational principles, beliefs about the communicative intentions of the speaker, and so on. Soames has three objections to this model of communication: (i) there is often no sense in which hearers compute the propositions semantically expressed by the sentences they hear, (ii) the proposition semantically expressed by a speaker may not exhaust what the speaker asserts in a context, and (iii) semantically expressed propositions have no primary or privileged place in the process of understanding (69–70). If this is right, and this model of communication is mistaken, then we cannot credit hearers with the ability to separate out semantically expressed propositions from pragmatically conveyed ones. This is an important part of Soames’s Millian solution to substitution puzzles about names and propositional attitude reports. Supporting this Millian approach is Soames’s main aim in objecting to this model of communication. But a number of Soames’s remarks suggest that he intends to use this argument to cast doubt on the cognitivist conception of semantics. He thinks that the cognitivist conception is the source of the “error” that “what something means is fully transparent to a person who understands it,” and “the cure for this error is to recognize that semantic claims about the expressions of a language are not claims about the individual psychologies, or states of mind, of language users” (71). These remarks might lead one to think that Soames is arguing as follows: if speakers possessed internalized semantic theories then they could use these theories to identify semantically expressed propositions. But speakers cannot identify semantically expressed propositions, and hence speakers must not have internalized semantic theories.

It is worth noting, however, that one can follow Soames in rejecting this model of communication without also rejecting the cognitivist conception. After arguing against this model of communication Soames remarks:

If what I am saying is correct, then we ought to give up the assumption that individual speakers have internalized semantic theories that provide them with the means of identifying the propositions semantically expressed by sentences and distinguishing them from other propositions the sentence may be used to assert or convey. (70)
But we can give up that assumption without also giving up the assumption that speakers possess internalized semantic theories. One can still hold that speakers possess internalized semantic theories that do not allow them to distinguish semantically expressed propositions from pragmatically conveyed ones. It might be that when presented with a sentence a hearer’s internalized semantic theory computes a semantic content, and other cognitive structures compute pragmatic contents, but the outputs of these processes do not come sorted into the categories semantic and pragmatic, in which case the hearer would not be able to distinguish between semantic and pragmatic contents. This leaves room for the view that semantics is the study of internalized semantic theories.

Of course, there would not be room for this view if Soames is right about (i), the claim that there is often no sense in which hearers compute the propositions semantically expressed by the sentences they hear. If hearers do not compute semantically expressed propositions then they must not possess internalized semantic theories. But Soames presents very little in the way of argument or evidence for (i). The kind of computation that goes on in linguistic processing is thought to occur at a cognitive level that is inaccessible to conscious awareness. In this respect, the computational processes involved in linguistic processing are akin to the unconscious computational procedures that occur in vision. One cannot refute the idea that there is this unconscious computation going on by appealing to intuitions about what goes on when a hearer is presented with a sentence, which is what Soames appears to be doing (69).

So I do not think that anything in this book poses a real threat to the idea that semantics is the study of speakers’ internalized semantic theories. Now it may be that I am reading too much into the connection that Soames appears to draw between the model of communication that he rejects and the cognitivist account of semantics. It may not have been his intention to present any sort of argument, explicit or implicit, against the cognitivist account in this book. If so, then what we have is an alternative to the cognitivist account, in the form of Soames’s positive account of semantics, but no argument against the cognitivist account. In what follows, however, I am going to raise some questions about whether Soames has in fact succeeded in articulating a clear alternative to the view that semantics is the study of speakers’ internalized theories of truth-conditions.

To this point I have followed Soames in speaking of the semantic contents of sentences, of the propositions that sentences semantically express, and of Russellian propositions that contain objects, properties and relations. But in doing so, I have not really understood what I have been talking about. These notions are obscure. We want to know what a theory of meaning is a theory of. Soames answers this question by saying that “the simplest and most fundamental question to be answered by a semantic theory is What do sentences say or express (relative to various contexts of
utterance)?” (3). The problem is that it is not clear what this means. People say and express various things in contexts, but what does it mean to say that a sentence says or expresses something in a context? These are technical uses of the words *say* and *express*. Elsewhere Soames has said that “a semantic theory should tell us what information is encoded by sentences relative to contexts.” The notion of encoding information is similarly obscure. A Soames-style semantic theory works by associating Russellian propositions with sentences relative to contexts. The Russellian proposition associated with a sentence and context is what the sentence says in that context—it is the information encoded by the sentence in that context. But we have no pre-theoretical or intuitive grip on what this means, and Soames never explains what it means. If this is to be an alternative to the view that the theory of meaning is a theory of truth-conditions then we need an explanation of what it is for a sentence to say or express a Russellian proposition relative to a context.

Part of the problem is due to the fact that nowhere in the book are we given an account of Russellian propositions. Soames says that these propositions contain or consist of objects, properties and relations, and he often represents propositions with the angle brackets of ordered n-tuples. For example, Soames writes:

> In the case of a simple sentence, $F_n$, containing an ordinary, linguistically simple proper name $n$ that refers to an object $o$, I argued that its meaning, or semantic content, is the singular, Russellian proposition, $<[o, F\text{-}hood]>$, that ascribes the property expressed by $F$ to $o$. (228)

Is the Russellian proposition expressed by $F_n$ just the ordered pair $<o, F\text{-}hood>$? If so, how does this ordered pair ascribe the property expressed by $F$ to $o$? It does not seem to me as though an ordered pair is capable of that sort of thing. And if Russellian propositions are not ordered pairs or ordered n-tuples, what are they? As far as I can tell, Soames says nothing to answer these questions. Because of this it is not clear what it means to say that the sentence *Aristotle was fond of dogs* semantically expresses the singular Russellian proposition consisting of Aristotle and the property of being fond of dogs. Presumably one thing this claim means (or implies) is that the sentence *Aristotle is fond of dogs* is not synonymous with any sentence in which a description has been substituted for *Aristotle*. But Soames intends to go beyond this negative result with his account of semantic content.

At first sight, it appears that Soames addresses these concerns with the account of semantic content that he presents in this book, i.e. SC2. As we have seen, on this account a noncontext-sensitive sentence $s$ semantically expresses a Russellian proposition $p$ just in case a competent speaker would assert and intend to convey $p$ in any normal context in which she utters $s$. 
Although I think there are problems with this account, for the sake of argument let’s assume it is correct. The question is whether it sheds light on Soames’s conception of semantics. The account appears to explain what it is for sentences to say or express propositions in terms of relations between speakers and propositions. A theory of meaning would thus be a theory of what competent speakers assert and intend to convey in normal contexts. This still leaves the nature of Russellian propositions unclear, and so it is still unclear what it is for a speaker to assert or convey a Russellian proposition. So this account of semantic content would go only part of the way toward explaining what a theory of meaning is a theory of. The problem is that it does not even do this. As we have seen, Soames does not intend his account of semantic content to be a definition. We cannot understand the claim that \( s \) semantically expresses \( p \) as a claim about what competent speakers assert and convey in normal contexts. To say that \( s \) semantically expresses \( p \) is not to say that competent speakers assert and convey \( p \) by uttering \( s \) in normal contexts. Because of this, it is not clear that just Soames is entitled to the claim that semantic claims are “social claims about the conventions and commonalities found in a linguistic community” (71). For Soames, semantic claims are “about” conventions and commonalities in linguistic communities only in the sense that they imply, and are implied by, generalizations about what competent speakers invariantly assert and convey. Someone who held the cognitivist conception could reasonably reply that her semantic theory is “about” conventions and commonalities in linguistic communities in exactly the same sense.

Many of Soames’s remarks, including those I have just quoted, suggest that he understands claims about the propositions semantically expressed by sentences simply to be claims about the meanings of sentences. Compare:

(1) Aristotle was fond of dogs, relative to a context \( c \), means that Aristotle was fond of dogs.

(2) Aristotle was fond of dogs, relative to \( c \), semantically expresses the singular Russellian proposition consisting of Aristotle and the property of being fond of dogs.

I think Soames’s view is that (1) and (2), if not strictly synonymous, are very close in meaning—(1) and (2) correspond to the same semantic fact about the sentence Aristotle was fond of dogs. But the direction of illumination here is from (1) to (2)—whatever grip we have on (2) is due to our prior understanding of (1). If this is right, then Soames’s account does not address the philosophical question of what a theory of meaning is a theory of. In investigating the subject matter of semantics what we are after, really, is a philosophical account of (1). It is no help to be told that the content of (1) is (2), if whatever grasp we have of (2) comes from our grasp of (1) and not the other way around.
This is not a demand for a reduction of semantic facts to non-semantic or non-intentional facts. I am not suggesting that in order for Soames to make his conception of semantics clear that he must restrict himself to concepts that can be reduced to non-semantic or non-intentional concepts. The only demand is that the concepts that Soames uses in his explanation are ones that we understand. Nor is this a demand that Soames provide an account of semantics on which knowledge of a theory of meaning for a language is sufficient for knowing that language—something that is required on the cognitivist approach. I am not arguing that Soames’s account fails to live up to the demands of a conception of semantics that he rejects. It may be that a theory can serve as a theory of meaning for a language even if knowing the theory is not sufficient for knowing the language. I am not sure. The problem I am raising is that it not clear what one would know if one knew (2).

At this point one is left wondering why Soames does not present his account of semantic content as a definition. Perhaps the reason is that it was not Soames’s aim in this book to provide a foundation for semantics. It is a frequent practice in science to make claims about theoretical entities without having a precise foundational account of what those entities are or how they are related to more familiar entities. What is good for science should also be good for semantics. But every indication in this book is that Soames aims both to forward views about the meanings of various expressions and to provide a general account of the nature of meaning. On the first page of the Preface he remarks:

I myself have long been a defender of the Millian view that the meanings of most linguistically simple proper names are their referents, and of the Neo-Russellian view that the proposition semantically expressed by an attitude ascription containing such a name in its content clause reports a relation between an agent and a singular, Russellian proposition. In this book I ground these views in a larger, explanatory conception of meaning, and of semantic content, together with an accompanying account of how the semantic content of a sentence relates to information conveyed and asserted by utterances of the sentence in different contexts. (v, my emphasis)

As this shows, Soames’s strategy is to support his claims about the meanings of names and attitude reports by providing a more general account of the nature of meaning. Clearly, then, one of his central aims must have been to provide such a general account.

Another possibility is that Soames’s reluctance to offer SC2 as a definition stems from a more general reluctance to define or analyze key theoretical terms one by one. Soames might hold that just as any key theoretical terms are implicitly defined by the theory in which they are used, the terms semantically expresses (says, semantically encodes) and Russellian proposition
are implicitly defined by the semantic theory in which they are used. The theory as a whole should be accepted or rejected depending on whether its empirically testable consequences are true or false.

In order for Soames to say this there must be empirically testable consequences of the semantic theory that are devoid of the implicitly defined theoretical terms. Let us see if this is so. There are two parts to a Soames-style semantic theory. In the first part structured Russellian propositions are assigned to sentences relative to contexts. This results in theorems like (2), which obviously contain implicitly defined theoretical vocabulary. In the second part truth-conditions are assigned to Russellian propositions, allowing one to derive sentences like (3):

(3) The singular Russellian proposition consisting of Aristotle and the property of being fond of dogs is true at a world w iff Aristotle was fond of dogs in w.

(Here I am ignoring complications about tense.) Sentences like (3) also contain theoretical vocabulary. However (3), in combination with (2), will entail (4):

(4) Aristotle was fond of dogs is true at a world w iff Aristotle was fond of dogs in w.

Perhaps sentences like (4) are the empirically testable consequences that we are looking for. A Soames-style semantic theory would be accepted or rejected depending on its consequences about the truth-conditions of sentences. But then one might rightly wonder why the detour through semantic expression and Russellian propositions was necessary in the first place. The very same consequences can be achieved directly using a Davidsonian theory of truth-conditions. In this respect, at least, the Davidsonian approach is preferable because it requires neither the relation of semantic expression nor Russellian propositions.

This is not to say that there are not serious problems for the Davidsonian truth-conditional approach to semantics. One familiar problem arises when we try to apply a Davidsonian truth-theory to propositional attitude reports. Davidson's own paratactic proposal is a noted failure. The other main contender is Larson and Ludlow's interpreted logical forms account, which Soames dispenses with in chapter 7 (Soames's main complaint against the Larson and Ludlow theory is closely analogous to the one I making against Soames's account of semantics. Soames argues that "until we are given an explanation of what it might mean to believe or assert what Larson and Ludlow call interpreted logical forms, accompanied by persuasive empirical evidence that we really do believe and assert these things, we won't have any grip on the right-hand sides of T-sentences like
[Mary believes that John speaks Spanish is true iff Mary believes the interpreted logical form whose root node is . . . ]” (151–2). This is a problem because, on the cognitivist conception, these T-sentences are supposed to be tacitly known by competent speakers. I can put my objection to Soames in similar words: until we are given an explanation of what it might mean for a sentence to semantically express what Soames calls a Russellian proposition, accompanied by persuasive empirical evidence that sentences really do semantically express these things, we won’t have any grip on the semantic claim that Aristotle was fond of dogs semantically expresses the singular Russellian proposition consisting of Aristotle and the property of being fond of dogs. However, for Soames the problem is not that competent speakers must have tacit knowledge of these sorts of semantic claims. Soames rejects the cognitivist conception of semantics. The problem for Soames is that we as theorists need to understand what these claims mean.

These failed attempts at semantic accounts of propositional attitude reports may lead one to conclude that the only viable account of attitude reports is one that treats attitude verbs as relational predicates and that-clauses as names for propositions. This does not yet show that we have to abandon Davidsonian semantics—just that we need to refer to and quantify over propositions in the construction of the truth-theory. Support for Soames-style semantics comes when we recognize that semantic claims, e.g. ‘Aristotle was fond of dogs’ means that Aristotle was fond of dogs, should be analyzed along the same lines as propositional attitude reports. If means is a two-place predicate that relates sentences to propositions then a semantic theory should reflect that fact by first assigning propositions to sentences and then assigning truth-conditions to propositions. I find this line of thought plausible. But I think it cries out for an account of what propositions are, and for an account of the nature of the semantic relation that holds between sentences and propositions. It is one thing to recognize that meanings are entities, and that people and sentences stand in relations to these entities. It is another to have a clear view of what these entities are and the relations that they enter into.

More problems for the Davidsonian approach arise when it is wedded to the cognitivist conception of semantics. In the papers cited earlier (fn.13) Soames shows that knowledge of truth-conditions is not sufficient for knowledge of meaning—and hence our semantic knowledge cannot simply be knowledge of truth-conditions. Because of this, a Davidsonian theory of truth-conditions is inadequate as a theory of what speakers know about meaning. Of course, we could try to divorce the truth-conditional and cognitivist approaches. Then we could say that a theory of meaning is a theory of truth-conditions, but we would have nothing to say about semantic knowledge or semantic competence. However, this would remove one of the main motivations for the truth-conditional approach, which is that knowledge of truth-conditions does in fact capture the semantic part of
what a competent speaker knows in knowing a language. All of this seems to leave us back where we started. Soames’s account of semantic content presents the prospect of progress in that it suggests an account that explains facts about meaning in terms of the concept of assertion. Soames does not take this step, but perhaps it is one worth considering.

The main critical point I have been making here is that Soames needs to do more work to explain his conception of semantics. The obscurity in Soames’s account also undermines his claim to have gone beyond the negative results about proper names in Naming and Necessity. Soames argues from the fact that Aristotle was fond of dogs semantically expresses a certain singular Russellian proposition to the conclusion that the content of Aristotle is just Aristotle. But until we know what this fact is, it is not clear that Soames has established this conclusion.

**Natural Kind Terms**

In the final three chapters of the book Soames takes up the issue of natural kind terms, e.g. mass terms like water, gold, and heat, count nouns like tiger and mammal, and adjectives like hot and loud. Here I will limit myself to a brief summary of these topics. In chapter 9 Soames addresses the question of the sense in which natural kind terms are rigid designators, with largely negative results. Part of the difficulty is that natural kind terms function primarily as predicates rather than as singular terms. This is obvious for the adjectives hot and loud. But it is also true of words like water and tiger. These sorts of expressions occur in predicative position, e.g. That stuff is water, Those animals are tigers, and they combine with determiners to form restricted quantifiers, e.g. some water, most tigers (246–8). So the question becomes: what is it for a predicate to be rigid? Soames considers a number of different answers and finds them all unsatisfactory (249–63). So, ultimately, “we are left with no answer to the question of what it means for a predicate to be a rigid designator” (262).

This leaves questions about the modal and epistemic statuses of identity statements containing natural kind terms, which Soames addresses in chapters 10 and 11. As we have seen, Soames holds that natural kind terms are primarily predicates. So theoretical identity statements have the forms (1) and (2):

1. \( \forall x (A_x \supset B_x) \)
2. \( \forall x (A_x \leftrightarrow B_x) \)

There are a number of different possibilities for the predicates A and B, which lead to different results about the modal and epistemic statuses of the corresponding identity statements. In chapter 10 Soames canvasses these results for count nouns. In chapter 11 he extends his conclusions to mass
nouns, in particular water. He also presents a solution to Mark Johnston’s puzzle about the identity statement *Water is H₂O*.²⁶

**Conclusion**

There are many important topics in this book that I have not mentioned. At the end of chapter 2 and in chapter 5 Soames argues convincingly that there is a class of what he calls “partially descriptive names”, e.g. *Professor Saul Kripke, New York City*. On Soames’s official theory of these expressions the content of *Professor Saul Kripke is a philosopher* is the same as the content of */the x: Professor(x) & x = y/ Philosopher(x)*, relative to an assignment of Kripke to y (110). A consequence of this is that these sorts of names are not rigid. On Soames’s view, the name *Professor Saul Kripke* does not denote Kripke at a world in which he is not a professor, and hence this name does not denote Kripke in every world in which he exists. Another important topic in the book is Soames’s approach to Frege’s puzzle about propositional attitude reports. Soames’s view on this is well known—he thinks that substitution of co-referential names within the scope of a propositional attitude verb does preserve truth-value, and that our intuitions to the contrary are confused. In chapter 6 Soames presents the problem, and in chapter 8 he uses his account of semantic content as support for his solution. One can see how this will work: there is a single proposition that competent speakers assert and intend to convey in normal contexts by utterances of the sentences *Edward believed that Peter Hempel lived on Lake Lane in Princeton* and *Edward believed that Carl Hempel lived on Lake Lane in Princeton*. This is the proposition that Edward believes the singular Russellian proposition consisting of a certain individual (Peter/Carl Hempel) and the property of living on Lake Lane in Princeton. Hence, this proposition is the content of both of these propositional attitude reports. Our intuitions that these sentences can have different truth-values, and hence different contents, is due to the fact that we are not careful to distinguish the proposition semantically expressed by these sentences from those non-semantic propositions that would be asserted or conveyed in context. Because of the crucial role that his account of semantic content plays in this argument and its attendant unclarieties about Russellian propositions and the relations to them, I think Soames solution to Frege’s puzzle could also use some clarification.

My favorite moment in the book occurs in a dense chapter on linguistic approaches to Frege’s puzzle.²⁷ There Soames rather relentlessly dismantles the Larson and Ludlow account of attitude reports, as well as Mark Richard’s Russellian annotated matrix account. In the midst of a very technical discussion, Soames remarks that “at this point it is essential that one not get caught up in technicalities, but rather step back and ask what is going on” (151). A chief merit of this excellent book is that Soames regularly...
follows his own advice. Another one of its great merits is the care and precision of Soames’s arguments, which are often laid out premise by premise. While I think that there is still work to be done, we should applaud Soames for the real philosophical progress that he has made.

Notes

1 Thanks to Kent Bach, Earl Conee, Jeff King, Francisca Reines, Paul Teller, and several anonymous referees for their help and encouragement. Special thanks to one anonymous referee who read a number of drafts and provided extensive and insightful comments, and to Michael Jubien for essential help in the early stages.

2 Soames relates that after a lecture he gave at UCLA in 1997 Kripke expressed sympathy with this assessment of his use of the notion of rigidity in Naming and Necessity. See Soames 2002, fn. 22, 366.

3 All page references in the text are to Soames 2002. In chapter 4 Soames extends this account of semantic content to ambiguous and indexical expressions by restricting the relevant contexts to those in which all indexicals have the same referents and all ambiguities are resolved in the same ways.

4 Kent Bach (Bach 2001) has argued that there are many noncontext-sensitive, unambiguous sentences that are never or almost never used literally, e.g. Jones hasn’t taken a bath. Speakers typically use this sentence to assert that Jones hasn’t taken a bath today (or that Jones hasn’t taken a bath since returning home, or etc.). Speakers do not typically use the sentence to assert what it literally means, which is that Jones hasn’t (ever) taken a bath. What this shows is that Soames’s notion of a “normal context” must be kept distinct from the notion of a typical or standard context. In many cases Soames’s “normal contexts” are not very normal.

5 A general proposition is one that does not depend for its truth or falsity on the features of some particular individual. For example, the proposition that the teacher of Alexander the Great was fond of dogs is true just in case the teacher of Alexander, whoever that happened to be, was fond of dogs. General propositions are typically expressed by sentences containing descriptions or other quantificational phrases.

6 Following Soames, I use bold italics for corner quotes.

7 Michael Thau has argued that something like this is in fact the case: “someone who has the descriptions associated with Hesperus and Phosphorus reversed, or who simply doesn’t know which description is associated with which name, seems to me to suffer from some linguistic confusion or ignorance about these names” (Thau 2002, 173). Whether or not Thau is right about this is irrelevant to the objection that I am raising—it is enough that this could be true of Hesperus and Phosphorus.

8 According to the Alternative Theory of Partially Descriptive Names, an assertive utterance of Hesperus is a planet counts as an assertion that Venus is a planet and that Venus is the first heavenly body visible in the evening. According to (2), what gets asserted is that Venus is a planet and that the first heavenly body visible in the evening is a planet.


10 See Grice 1989, 37–8 for generalized conversational implicature, and Carston 2002, 97–8 for scalar implicature. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting these examples.


14 Soames 1989, 575.

15 See Bealer 1998 for criticisms of the ordered n-tuple account of Russellian propositions.

16 It is worth noting that Russell himself eventually abandoned the account of propositions for which the contemporary view is named. In 1903 in The Principles of Mathematics Russell held that propositions are composed out of objects, properties and relations. But he recognized
that a proposition could not simply be a structured collection of such entities. “Every proposition has a unity,” says Russell “which renders it distinct from the sum of its parts” (Russell 1903, 52). Russell held that the property or relation that occurs in a proposition is responsible for its unity. The upshot of this is that propositions are identical with facts. And this leads to insoluble difficulties about false propositions. If propositions are facts, and there are no “false facts”, then what are false propositions? This problem, and others, led Russell in 1910 to abandon propositions altogether in favor of his multiple relation theory of judgment. See Russell 1904 and 1910.

(1) and (2) are not synonymous because they contain co-denoting but non-synonymous terms, i.e. that Aristotle was fond of dogs and the singular Russellian proposition consisting of Aristotle and the property of being fond of dogs. See Soames 1992, 30–31. Another difference is that (1), unlike (2), is not sensitive to Kaplan’s distinction between character and content.

I am grateful to an anonymous referee for forcing me to clarify this.

See also 56–8, 204, and 242.

Thanks to an anonymous referee for making this suggestion.

Yet another possibility is that we could add to a Soames-style semantic theory the account of semantic content presented in the book, i.e. SC2. This would lead to consequences like (5):

(5) By assertive utterances of Aristotle was fond of dogs in normal contexts competent speakers assert and convey the Russellian proposition consisting of Aristotle and the property of being fond of dogs.

But once again, (5) contains some of the theoretical vocabulary implicitly defined by the theory.

See Schiffer 1987, 122–137.


Thanks to an anonymous referee for discussion of this point.

See Lepore 1983.


Chapter 7.

References


