

## Comments on Scott Soames' 'Coordination Problems'

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A major theme of 'Semantic Relationism' was that many of the familiar worries over the substitutivity of names in belief contexts may be resolved by going relational. But Soames, in his interesting and action-packed paper, has argued that even if the more familiar worries are removed there are variants of them that will remain.

Consider, for example, the two belief reports, 'John believes that Hesperus is a planet' and 'John believes that Phosphorus is a planet'. Then a worry for relationist and referentialist alike is that the component clauses 'Hesperus is a planet' and 'Phosphorus is a planet' will express the very same proposition, viz. a singular proposition to the effect that a certain object is a planet. But from this it would appear to follow that the belief reports must have the same truth-value - which clearly need not be so.

How is the relationist to respond? Taking a cue from my treatment of cognitive significance (SR, 78-85), Soames suggests on behalf of the relationist that the belief reports should be evaluated within the context of other belief attributions. Suppose, for example, that it has been presupposed that John believes that Phosphorus is visible in the morning. Then in this context, the report 'John believes that Hesperus is a planet' will be true (or, at least, correct), given that he has a belief that the object is visible in the morning and an uncoordinated belief that the object is a planet. But in the same context, the report that 'John believes that Phosphorus is a planet' may well be false (or incorrect), since his belief that the object is visible in the morning may not be coordinated with his belief that the object is a planet. The relationist can therefore explain how we might end up accepting the one belief report but not the other.

But Soames argues that this response does not 'go far enough' (p. 7), since assumptions about the agent's beliefs may not be part of

the context and since, even when they are part of the context, they may be insufficient to distinguish in the required way between the given belief reports. Thus even though relationism can take care of some of the cases, it cannot take care of them all; and ‘something more than coordination seems to be at work’ (p. 8).

I agree with Soames that the response is inadequate. But it is not one that I did or would wish to make. The difficulty, to my mind, lies in his inference from the component clauses expressing the same proposition to the belief reports having the same truth-value. For this inference rests upon a critical assumption, which we may state roughly as follows:

(SB) If the sentence *S* expresses the proposition *p*, then the belief report ‘John believes that *S*’ is true iff John believes *p*.<sup>1</sup>

But I would wish to reject this assumption. The truth of a belief report does not merely turn upon the agent standing in the ‘belief-relation’ to the proposition expressed by its embedded clause. And given that I reject the assumption, the worry over the identity of truth-value will not arise.

But if (SB) is to be rejected, then what should be put in its place? I suggested that there might be different readings of a belief report and different conditions under which those readings were true (SR, 103-4). Under the reading most relevant to Soames’ examples (what I call the ‘strict de dicto reading’), a belief report such as ‘John believes that Hesperus is a planet’ will be true iff John has a belief with the given singular content in which the subject of the belief is coordinated with the name in the report. Thus standing in the belief-relation to the content is not enough for the belief report to be true; there must also be an appropriate form of coordination between the belief and the report.

So we see that the relationist does have a response to the worry that Soames raises. However, the way relationism comes in is not through embedding the speaker’s report in a larger context of belief attributions, as Soames had supposed, but through seeing the speaker’s report and the agent’s belief as forming a single context, in which relationships of coordination relevant to the truth of the report may then be discerned.

If we adopt this account of the strict de dicto reading, then all of the difficulties raised by Soames’ cases (with the exception of those involving pronouns) would seem to disappear. Consider, for example, the case in

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<sup>1</sup> I have prescind from difficulties over ambiguity, indexicality etc. I might also have said ‘Mary BELIEVES *p*’ on the right, leaving open whether ‘believes’ and ‘BELIEVES’ are to be understood in exactly the same way. Also, within the context of relationism, (SB) can, at best, only be taken to be applicable to a single ‘non-composite’ belief report.

which John is warranted in believing that Hesperus is Hesperus and in which, while looking up at Hesperus, he has a warranted belief that he would express in the words 'That's Hesperus'. Soames is worried that John's should then believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus, since all that that requires is that he should believe the uncoordinated identity of the object Hesperus with the object Hesperus. But if the report 'John believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus' is subject to the strict *de dicto* reading, then this conclusion will not follow, since it will also be required that John's belief should be appropriately coordinated with the report.

However, this is not the end of the matter. For Soames might reasonably complain that the possibility of having a compositional semantics for belief reports will depend upon adopting something like (SB). For under a compositional semantics, the meaning of a belief report such as 'John believes that S' will depend upon the meaning of its parts - say, 'John', 'believes that', and 'S'. But under the relationist semantics, there is nothing for the meaning of 'S' to be other than the proposition that it expresses. So it follows that, if S and S' express the same proposition, then 'John believes that S' and 'John believes that S'' will have the same meaning and will therefore have the same truth-value - which is all that Soames needs to derive his objections to my view.

It might be thought that this complaint must somehow be misguided. For did I not provide truth-conditions for belief reports and, in so doing, did I not thereby provide a compositional semantics? The answer is 'no'; for a plausible account of the truth-conditions for simple belief-reports need not yield a plausible semantics for belief reports. Suppose we ask: what is the proposition expressed by the report 'John believes that Hesperus is a planet'? If we go by the stated truth-conditions for the report, we then get that the proposition is that John has a belief with a certain content (expressed by the embedded clause) that is coordinated with the report. But the proposition expressed by the report is then about the report itself (or, at least, about the names in the report); and this is not plausible.

Nor, it seems, can the question of what proposition is expressed by the belief report be avoided. For in giving a semantics, we need to specify the meaning of each sentence, including the belief reports. The meaning is most naturally taken to be the proposition expressed and, even if it is not the proposition expressed, it is still unclear from the truth-conditions what it might be. Furthermore, if we are to give truth-conditions for iterative belief reports such as 'Mary believes that John believes that Hesperus is a planet' then, even putting aside all considerations of meaning, we will still need to say what proposition is expressed by the embedded clause, since it is by reference to such a proposition that we will explain the truth-conditions for the iterative report.

So despite appearances, we do not have an adequate semantics, or even a fully adequate account of the truth-conditions, for belief reports. (SB) must therefore be allowed to stand and will give rise to the difficulties that Soames enumerates.

The obvious response to these difficulties is to provide a compositional semantics for belief reports within the relational framework. But this is not something I do or know how to do. Indeed, I concluded chapter 4 of SR on a pessimistic note. I claimed that ‘the correctness of a single belief report cannot be taken to turn on whether the subject believes the proposition signified by the embedded clause of the report’ and that ‘there are ... enormous difficulties in providing anything like a standard compositional semantics for individual belief reports’ (SR 121), where, under the rubric of ‘anything like’, I intended to include my own relational approach.

The situation is deeply embarrassing. I *do* have an account of the truth-conditions of certain belief reports which, I argue, is capable of solving a number of otherwise intractable problems. But these truth-conditions are not embedded within a compositional semantics for belief reports and nor do I indicate how such a semantics might go. My one solace is that the difficulties which stand in the way of providing a standard compositional semantics are of a quite general nature and do not appear to turn on the details of any particular approach. Once we accept the data concerning certain types of Paderewski case, it seems impossible to see how anything like (SB) or a compositional semantics could be correct, *whatever* our conception of the proposition expressed by the embedded clause (SR, 119-21).

Soames might retort that the cases he raises against me are not of a Paderewski type and that it is therefore quite reasonable to suppose that I should be able to provide a semantics for these cases even if it is not clear how it is to be extended to the Paderewski-type cases. I myself am not quite sure how reasonable this demand actually is, since it is not clear to what extent our treatment of the Paderewski-type cases will ultimately impact upon our treatment of the normal cases. But no matter—since the demand *can* in fact be met.

I distinguished in SR between *uncoordinated* and *coordinated* content (pp. 54-6). The uncoordinated proposition is the standard Russellian proposition, while the coordinated proposition is a standard Russellian proposition in which different occurrences of any given individual may or may not be ‘linked’. The sentences ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ will express the same uncoordinated proposition but different coordinated propositions, while the sentences ‘Hesperus is a planet’ and ‘Phosphorus is a planet’ will express the same uncoordinated proposition and also the same coordinated proposition (since

there are no two occurrences of the individual to be linked). It is because of this difference between the two pairs of sentences that it is possible to provide a straightforward account of the semantical difference between 'John believes that Hesperus is Hesperus' and 'John believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus' though not possible to provide a straightforward account of the semantical difference between 'John believes that Hesperus is a planet' and 'John believes that Phosphorus is a planet'.

But there is a third notion of content to which I have been tempted to appeal (though I did not discuss it in SR). We might unimaginatively call it *tertiary* content - where uncoordinated content is taken to be *primary* and coordinated content to be *secondary*. Consider all of the propositions that are realized in propositional acts such as believing, asserting, intending and the like. They form a vast coordinated *body* of propositions, where some of the occurrences of any given individual in these propositions are linked to others and some are not (SR, 56). Thus if I believe that Hesperus is brighter than Phosphorus then this will put an occurrence of a negatively coordinated proposition *that x is brighter than x* into the body of propositions. If you now believe that Phosphorus is brighter than Hesperus then this will put another occurrence of the negatively coordinated proposition *that x is brighter than x* into the body of propositions, but one in which the first *x* of the first proposition is coordinated with the second *x* of the second proposition and the second *x* of the first proposition is coordinated with the first *x* of the second proposition. On the other hand, if a third person believes that Hesperus is brighter than Phosphorus then no new proposition is added to the body of propositions, since there is not even a relational difference between what I believe and what the third person believes.

This universal body of propositions is an abstract structure, existing at the level of semantic value, even though its composition is determined by people's actual acts of belief and assertion and the like. As we have noted, the same coordinated proposition may have several occurrences within the body of propositions; and so let us call these occurrences *token* propositions. The identity of a token proposition is partly given by its intrinsic content, i.e. by the underlying coordinated proposition, and partly by its coordinative links to other token propositions. Different tokens of the same coordinated proposition are distinguished to the extent that this is required to account for the coordinative links between them.

Just as we may differentiate a proposition into various token propositions within the universal body of propositions, so may differentiate an individual into various token individuals. For to each occurrence of

an individual in a token proposition will correspond a token individual, as given by the class of all those occurrences of the individual with which it is coordinated.<sup>2</sup> Thus in the example above, there will be two tokens of the individual  $x$  (which in fact are indiscernible from one another). Any token proposition will involve a certain predicative content and certain token individuals; and it will be possible to uniquely determine the token proposition from its content and its token individuals. Token individuals are a little like ‘guises’ or individual concepts, but there is no special descriptive content or mode of presentation with which they must be associated.

So far we have said nothing about names or how they might relate to the universal body of propositions. But whenever a name is introduced into the language, there will be something like an originating intention, an intention that the name should name its referent  $x$ . Corresponding to the intention will be a token proposition *that the name names  $x$*  and, corresponding to the name, will be a token of its referent, the one which corresponds to the occurrence of  $x$  in the token proposition.

We now have the resources to develop a semantics for belief reports at the level of tertiary content. Consider the report, ‘John believes that Hesperus is a planet’. Associated with the name ‘Hesperus’ will be a certain token individual and associated with the predicate ‘is a planet’ will be a certain property. These two will then determine a token proposition, which we may take to be the proposition attributed to John. Since the name ‘Phosphorus’ will be associated with a different token individual, we may distinguish, by purely compositional means, between the report with ‘Hesperus’ and the corresponding report with ‘Phosphorus’.

It may appear that relationism has disappeared from the account. But this is not really so, for relationism in what expressions mean has reappeared as a form of relationism in their meanings. The token propositions, which are to be the meanings of sentences, will have an identity that can only be understood in relational terms and the universal body of propositions to which they belong must ultimately be understood by reference to an underlying relationism in the propositional acts by which it is given.

The present account raises a number of questions. To what extent can we give a token individual an identity across worlds, which is essential if we are to provide counterfactual truth-conditions for belief reports? To what extent are token individuals genuinely non-linguistic

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<sup>2</sup> We may assume that coordination is an equivalence relation, since it is only the Paderewski-type examples which might lead us to question this assumption.

and not 'tainted' by the name with which they may be associated? And is the appeal to tertiary content merely ad hoc or can it be seen to be an instance of a more general linguistic mechanism, perhaps analogous to the Fregean mechanism of oblique reference? This is not the place to go into such questions. But I hope enough has been said to make it plausible that the challenge to relationism raised by Soames's examples can indeed be met.

I wish to conclude by briefly discussing two other objections that Soames has raised. Suppose someone has some information that he would express in the words 'Cicero is Roman' though not any information that he would express in the words 'Tully is Roman'. Then on being told 'Cicero is an orator', he would be in a position to infer that there is a Roman orator, though not on being told that 'Tully is an orator'. Since the referentialist takes 'Cicero is an orator' and 'Tully is an orator' to convey the same information, how is he able to account for our ability to obtain the further information in the one case though not in the other? (SR, 80).

I had suggested that 'in the face of this difficulty, most referentialists would be tempted to go linguistic' (SR, 81), replacing reasoning *in* language with reasoning *about* language. But Soames argues that there is no need to foist this unpalatable view on my opponent. For:

'In the first case, the hearer's premises and conclusions are propositions expressed by the sentences he accepts, or comes to accept. As in formal logic, transparent *logical* relations holding among *sentences* expressing premises and conclusion allow him to pass from the one to the other. By contrast, when he is told 'Tully is an orator', there are no *logical* relations among *sentences* he accepts that license accepting *any sentence* expressing the proposition that Cicero is a Roman orator.' (pp. 9-10)

There are two aspects to the problem that I raised. The first is that, given that the hearer is told 'Cicero is an orator', how can he then obtain information that he could express in the words 'Cicero is an orator'? Call this the *transference* problem. The second is that, given that he has information that he would express in the words 'Cicero is Roman' and 'Cicero is an orator', how is the hearer able to infer that there is a Roman orator, though not in the case in which he has information which he would express in the words 'Cicero is Roman' and 'Tully is an orator'? Call this the *inference* problem.

I take it that the transference problem is relatively unproblematic. All that the hearer need do is 'take over' his informant's words, so to speak. Thus our original problem is effectively equivalent to the inference problem. Indeed, the two problems collapse into one another if the hearer and the informant are taken to be the same.

Soames' proposed solution to the inference problem is to appeal to logical form. There is a transparent logical relation among the sentences expressing premises and conclusion which allows the hearer to pass from one to the other in the one case, though not in the other. I was perhaps remiss in not considering this proposal, but it is hard to see how it provides a solution. For given that the contents of the premise sentences are the same, we need to understand how it is that the logical relations can be transparent in the one case and not in the other. How can a difference in the choice of a name, whose meaning is the same, make any difference to what one is in a position to infer?

We can bring out the inadequacy of Soames' solution if we note that it makes no appeal to referentialism. It simply takes for granted that the logical relations among the sentences are what they are, without regard for what they might mean. Thus this line of solution, if acceptable, could be adopted by any theorist, no matter how crazy his view of what the sentences mean. But surely the question of the transparency of the sentential inferences cannot be divorced in this way from their semantics. We are not entitled simply to take the differences in the transparency of the inferences for granted but must somehow show how those differences are compatible with the sentences having the meanings that we take them to have.

What is therefore required for a solution along these lines to be adequate is that we provide an account of what it is for the names to be the 'same' or 'different' and an account of how the names being the same or different thereby makes a difference to the transparency of the inference. But although this might appear to be a straightforward task, I doubt that my referentialist opponent is able to achieve it. For as I pointed out (SR, 41), 'it cannot be a matter of having the same typographic name' since the one name could be used for Cicero the orator and the other for Cicero the spy, and 'nor can it be a matter of having the same name with the same reference' since, 'through a freak of transmigration, it might turn out that Cicero the orator is one and the same as Cicero the spy'. And nor, I might add, can it be a matter of the two names having a common origin, for Peter's two uses of 'Paderewski' have a common origin even though the inference with the two names is not transparent to him. We uncritically take the difference in the transparency of the inferences for granted, but it is far from clear how the existence of the difference is to be reconciled with the referentialist semantics.

The other objection Soames makes is to my account of the relationship between language and thought. I had claimed that 'there is no more to the content of my belief than there is to the content of my words [by which the belief might be expressed]' (SR, 76). 'The idea',



Soames remarks, 'is that for every proposition *p* I believe, there is a unique token belief state of mine the full content of which is *p*' (p. 9). But Soames argues that the corresponding thesis about perception is incorrect. For:

'Suppose I see something *o* which is presented to me as red. Although we speak of *my perception that o is red*, we don't think that *o*'s being red is the full content of my perceptual experience - which may also represent *o* as being small, round etc.'

And if the thesis is not correct for perception, then perhaps it is also not correct for belief.

I doubt that Soames' formulation of the 'idea' or thesis properly gets at what is at issue, though my own exposition may have been somewhat misleading in this regard. For take someone like Soames who wishes to reject the thesis. He may then make the thesis irrelevantly true by supposing that for each token belief *b* whose content includes *p*, there is a further token belief - something which we might represent by the ordered pair  $\langle b, p \rangle$  - whose content is exclusively *p*. Or take someone like myself who wishes to accept the thesis. I may then make the thesis irrelevantly false by supposing that the only genuine token belief is the fusion of what I previously took to be the individual token beliefs. The thesis in its application to perception may similarly be rendered irrelevantly true or irrelevantly false. I may claim, for example, that the perception that *o* is red is different from my perceptual experience on the grounds that it is an 'aspect' of my perceptual experience whose sole content is that *o* is red.

Perhaps a somewhat better way of getting at what is at issue is this. Can one *simply* believe that an object has a given property? In believing that an object has a given property, must one thereby believe something with additional content (where it should here be allowed that the additional content may not belong to the belief in the same way as the given content)? Similarly, can one *simply* perceive that an object has a certain property? In perceiving that an object has a certain property, must one thereby perceive something with additional content? In formulating the question in this way, we have made no reference to token beliefs or token perceptions and so views concerning their identity will not get in the way of the answer.

Call the thesis that one can simply believe (perceive etc.) that an object has a given property *content minimalism*. Then it is plausible that content minimalism fails for perception (at least in its application to most properties). For suppose I see that a ball is red. Then surely I must thereby see that it has a certain size or shape and surely I must not merely see that it *is* red but I must thereby see it *as* red. So in this case, there is additional *complexity* - further content that attaches

to what is perceived in the same primary way as the original content; and there is perhaps additional *coloring* - further content that attaches to what is perceived as a mode of presentation of the primary content.

But neither of these ways in which content minimalism fails for perception has any plausible application to belief. If I believe that a particular ball is red, then there is no need for me to believe that it has a certain size or shape, let us say, and there would appear to be no obvious need for me to believe that the ball is red in any particular way - either through an image of the ball as red, say, or through some description by which the ball is given. The inherent complexity and coloring of perception would appear to be lacking from belief. And content minimalism also applies, on the referentialist view, to what we say or mean. I can *simply* say that a particular ball is red without thereby saying anything beyond the singular proposition that the ball is red.

Thus, if I am right, the comparison with perception serves to reinforce, rather than to undermine, the analogy I wished to draw between the minimal representational content of language and of thought.