

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

**Scott Soames: Philosophical Essays, Volume 1**

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2008, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: [permissions@press.princeton.edu](mailto:permissions@press.princeton.edu)

---

## Introduction

THE FIFTEEN ESSAYS in this volume span twenty-eight years of thinking about linguistic meaning—what it is, how we use it, and what questions should be answered by empirical theories dealing with it. A central task undertaken in the essays is to distinguish different, but intricately related, kinds of linguistically expressed information—including (i) what a sentence means (ii) what is presupposed in uttering it, (iii) what is asserted, and (iv) what is merely implicated, or suggested. An overarching theme, starting in part 1, is that the relationships among these are intricate, complex, and nontransparent—with far-reaching implications for theories of linguistic meaning and language use.

As competent speakers, we do, of course, understand most of the sentences we use, and most of the utterances we hear. However, I argue, this understanding is not the source of privileged, systematic, and reliable intuitions about the semantic properties of sentences—such as when two of them mean the same thing—or about pragmatic properties of their use—such as which information carried by an utterance is due to the meaning of the sentence uttered, and which is due to other factors. In short, though the distinctions between the different types of information (i)–(iv) are theoretically important, the ability to speak and understand a language provides, at best, an incomplete and a highly fallible ability to reliably recognize instances of each. Nothing could be further from the truth than the old saw that theories of meaning (semantics) and use (pragmatics) are theories of the untutored linguistic intuitions of competent speakers.

The same negative point can be made about the still popular view that linguistic theories of natural language in general, and semantic theories in particular, are attempts to explicate the unconscious internalized theories employed by speakers in understanding and using their language. Natural languages are, of course, human products. Both their causal origins, and their continued existence, stem from causally efficacious action—of an as yet largely unknown sort—in the minds of speakers. It does not follow, however, that the only sensible empirical inquiry about language is inquiry into the cognitive architecture that generates and sustains them. Sentences, and other expressions, have grammatical structures and representational contents that can be studied in abstraction from questions about how they initially came to have those structures and contents,

what psychological states and processes are responsible for their retaining them, or how speakers come to know whatever they do know about them. This nonpsychologistic perspective is fleshed out in the first two essays of part 2.

The central notion in a theory of meaning is representational content. Complications aside, to know the meaning of a sentence is to know the ways in which uses of it represent the world to be. Thus, to a first approximation, the meaning of a sentence is a function from contexts of utterance to ways the sentence represents the world as being—with the meaning of subsentential expressions being that which they contribute to the meanings of sentences in which they occur. Since to represent the world as being a certain way is to impose conditions that must be satisfied if the world is to be way it is represented to be, the representational content of a sentence in a context determines its truth conditions (as used in the context). Hence, a central task of a theory of meaning for a language is to specify the truth conditions of its sentences. How far this takes us, and what more may be required of an adequate semantic theory, are the central preoccupations of the last three essays in part 2.

The essays in parts 3 and 4 are concerned with the relationship between meaning, assertion, and conversational implicature. The main conclusions are: (i) that what is said or asserted by an utterance often exceeds the semantic content of the sentence uttered, (ii) that Gricean maxims responsible for conversational implicatures sometimes supplement semantic content in determining what is said or asserted, (iii) that sometimes the semantic contents of sentences are not among the propositions asserted by normal (nonironic, nonmetaphorical) utterances of them, (iv) that nevertheless there is an intimate and systematic relationship between the two, (v) that articulating the nature of this relationship makes possible solutions to previously outstanding semantic and pragmatic problems involving names, definite descriptions, and propositional attitude ascriptions, and (vi) that semantic and pragmatic theories incorporating these solutions fit naturally into the abstract, nonpsychologistic conception of linguistic theories sketched in part 2. The final essay, in part 5, shows how practical consequences about the interpretation of legal texts can be drawn from this theoretical perspective.

## PART 1: PRESUPPOSITION

The first essay, “A Projection Problem for Speaker Presuppositions,” originally appeared in 1979. The projection problem, as it was then conceived, was that of determining the presuppositions of compound sentences on the basis of the presuppositions of their component clauses,

and the propositions they express. Though the essay is nearly three decades old, it contains four items that may still be of some interest. First, it articulates a framework for extracting predictions about speaker presupposition from approaches that use different theoretical conceptions—(i) presuppositions as conditions for avoiding truth-value gaps, (ii) presuppositions as Gricean conventional implicatures, and (iii) presuppositions as requirements for incrementing sets of propositions previously assumed or established in the context. The empirical predictions extracted from these approaches can then be treated as a kind of common currency that allows us to compare and evaluate them. Second, the essay specifies data demonstrating the inadequacy of an important approach, advocated by Lauri Karttunen and Stanley Peters, in which Montague semantics is extended to cover non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning by dividing the semantic content of an expression into two parts—its contribution to truth conditions and its contribution to conventional implicatures (which were identified with presuppositions). (A related negative result for three-valued systems is obtained simultaneously.) Third, the essay argues that a positive solution to the projection problem must incorporate conversational implicatures in a way that had previously been disallowed. However, it also shows that the simplest strategies for doing so fail to accommodate all relevant data. Finally, the essay poses the challenge of finding a descriptively adequate, and theoretically explanatory, way of combining needed features of the semantic (three-valued or conventional implicature) approach with essential pragmatic features.<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, I tried, unsuccessfully, to answer this challenge in “How Presuppositions Are Inherited: A Solution to the Projection Problem” (1982). Though that paper discusses a great deal of data, and provides a snapshot of the strengths and weaknesses of the then leading approaches, in retrospect it is clear that the proposed solution was both descriptively incomplete, and theoretically unsatisfying. This, along with many other things, is discussed in essay 2, “Presupposition.” There, I distinguish several notions of presupposition drawn from the philosophical literature: “logical presupposition,” defined as a necessary condition for having a truth-value,<sup>2</sup> “expressive presupposition,” defined as a necessary condition for a sentence’s expressing a proposition,<sup>3</sup> and “pragmatic presupposition,” defined as a requirement that a

<sup>1</sup> One minor descriptive problem with the discussion in the essay is its incorrect description of the presuppositions of certain classes of sentences, including *A Ved, too*, *A Ved again*, and *It was A that Ved*. These errors are corrected in the final section of essay 2.

<sup>2</sup> Derived from Gottlob Frege.

<sup>3</sup> Derived from one of two lines of thought found in, but conflated by, Peter Strawson.

use of a sentence places on the existing conversational record (including the set of shared background assumptions) at the time of utterance.<sup>4</sup> The question is raised as to how, if at all, these notions apply to the vast outpouring of descriptive data on presupposition gathered by linguists in the 1970s and early 1980s.

It is argued that (some) requirements placed by pragmatic presuppositions on the conversational record must be defeasible in two different ways: (i) by *de facto* accommodation—whereby certain apparent violations of presuppositional requirements result in the conversational record being updated to accommodate them—and (ii) by *de jure* accommodation—in which the presuppositional requirements are cancelled, or rendered inoperative, by other pragmatic implicatures, or features of the context, with which they may conflict. It is further argued that the need for these two forms of accommodation undermines both logical presupposition and conventional implicature as sources of at least some pragmatic presuppositions. More strongly, it is argued against Stalnaker, on independent grounds, that logical presuppositions—in the sense of necessary conditions on the avoidance of truth-value gaps—*are never the source of pragmatic presuppositions*. On a more constructive note, the rudiments of Irene Heim’s ingenious use of Discourse Representation Semantics (an extension of Montague semantics to provide semantic interpretations of whole discourses) to solve the projection problem are discussed. After pointing out a number of the attractive features of the system, I offer some descriptive and explanatory criticisms. The essay closes with a brief discussion of the varieties of presupposition, and the suggestion that presupposition may not be a unitary phenomenon, after all.<sup>5</sup>

## PART 2: LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

These essays are concerned with how syntactic and semantic theories are related to psychological theories of the linguistic competence of language users. Essays 3 and 4—“Linguistics and Psychology” and “Semantics and Psychology”—argue that, despite being relevant to cognitive psychology, syntax and semantics are not themselves branches of that discipline. Some linguistic facts, including certain facts about truth and reference, are directly relevant to theories of natural language in ways they are not

<sup>4</sup>Derived from Robert Stalnaker.

<sup>5</sup>The reader interested in a more recent, comprehensive account of presupposition in natural language should consult Beaver (2000). Another fascinating piece, directly relevant to essays 1 and 2, is Kripke (n.d.).

relevant to psychological theories of linguistic competence.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, psychological facts about speakers' linguistic performance bear on psychological theories of competence in ways they don't bear on syntactic and semantic theories. Since theories in the two domains answer different questions and are responsible to different facts, they are conceptually distinct. In addition, I argue, there is little reason to expect the formal structures posited by linguistic theories to be isomorphic to cognitive structures posited by psychological theories of linguistic competence. Although natural language is a quintessential human product, linguistic theories are only indirectly related to questions about the cognitive architecture that produces it. For example, syntactic and semantic universals limiting the formal systems qualifying as possible natural human languages constrain feasible hypotheses about the cognitive structures responsible for language acquisition and use, but they don't identify such structures. In general, theories in syntax and semantics are rich sources of psychological questions, even though they typically don't answer them.

Essay 5, "Semantics and Semantic Competence," extends the nonpsychological conception by arguing that semantic competence does not arise from knowledge of the semantic properties of expressions characterized by a correct semantic theory. First, I explain why knowledge of truth conditions is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding. Next I sketch a conception of structured propositions, and outline a semantic theory in which meanings of sentences are functions from contexts to such propositions. Although this semantic theory is an improvement over a strict truth-conditional account, knowledge of its theorems, linking sentence-context pairs to propositions, is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the gap between semantics and semantic competence remains, even on the most promising semantic theory. The argument is

<sup>6</sup>This is, I think, a better way of putting the point than was done in the section "Truth Conditions" of essay 3, where an unduly narrow characterization of psychological theories was suggested that was all-too-easily (mis)read as excluding so-called *wide contents* of mental states. Today I would state the argument differently. The semantic facts of a language are constituted by facts about how its terms were initially introduced, the beliefs and intentions of subsequent language users, the norms and presuppositions governing their interactions with one another, and the relations they bear to things in their environments. Neither the semantic facts of the language, nor many of the underlying facts constituting them, are facts about which psychological theories of individual agents make claims or predictions. Rather, many are facts on which claims about wide-psychological content depend.

<sup>7</sup>I would now formulate the argument for this point slightly differently. Whereas I was formerly inclined to accept assumption (13a) in the essay, Richard (1993) has convinced me that it is more questionable than I first realized. (See my discussion in Soames n.d.) Without (13a), instances of what is called "schema K" in the essay cannot be derived from the semantic theory, in which case it is obvious that knowledge of the relevant theorems is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding the language.

capped by a point about explanatory priority. In many cases in which competent speakers do have knowledge of the semantic properties of sentences and other expressions, their competence doesn't derive from that knowledge; rather their semantic knowledge is derived from, and explained by, their competence.

In essay 6, "The Necessity Argument," I distinguish the basis of my opposition to Noam Chomsky's psychological/conceptualist conception of linguistics from Jerrold Katz and Paul Postal's "realist"/Platonist criticism of that position. The issue concerns theorems—essential to any adequate semantic theory—stating that certain sentences are *necessary* truths/falsehoods, and that certain sentences follow *necessarily* from other sentences. The criticism by Katz and Postal is that since the theorems of empirical psychological theories—of the sort Chomsky takes linguistic theories to be—must be contingent, they cannot include semantic claims about the modal status of sentences. My essay explains why this is not so. Opposition to the Chomskian reduction of linguistics to psychology need not depend on one's views about the ontology of linguistic objects, one's views of their modal properties, or one's conception of how we find out about them.

Essays 7 and 8, "Truth, Meaning, and Understanding" and "Truth and Meaning—in Perspective," raise a foundational question about Donald Davidson's program in semantics. What justification, if any, can be given for taking a Davidsonian truth theory to be a theory of meaning? The two essays canvass the main attempts to answer this question, and explain why—despite the attractiveness of the program, and the reasons for initial optimism about providing a positive answer—none of the major attempts to do so can be accepted. In addition, it is argued, this series of attempts has led to a mismatch between the proposed justificatory requirements of the program and the empirical research done to advance it. The proposed requirements that must be satisfied by true, compositional, truth theories, if they are to count as candidates for theories of meaning, have been tightened to the point that important Davidsonian analyses of linguistic constructions advanced by working semanticists don't satisfy them. Together, the problems of justification and mismatch constitute a crisis in this approach to the theory of meaning.

### PART 3: SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

The next three essays sketch a new conception of the relationship between the theory of linguistic meaning (semantics) and the theory of the use of sentences to assert and convey information (pragmatics). Although similar in some respects to recent thoughts of Kent Bach (1994),

Robyn Carston (2002), Stephen Neale (2007), and François Recanati (1993, 2003), my conception grew out of the position taken in *Beyond Rigidity* (Soames 2002). There, I proposed that a speaker who utters a sentence *S* often asserts several propositions, including some that are pragmatically enriched, and that the semantic content of *S* is a proposition which, for every normal context *C* in which *S* is uttered, is among those asserted. These points were used to explain how substitution of coreferential names in simple sentences may change the propositions asserted by utterances of those sentences, even when it doesn't change the propositions semantically expressed. Extending this lesson to sentences used to ascribe assertions and beliefs allowed me to reconcile a Millian semantic analysis of linguistically simple names with Fregean intuitions about the assertions made, the beliefs ascribed, and the information conveyed by utterances of sentences differing only in the substitution of coreferential names. In short, I argued that a new conception of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics could be used to make an important contribution to the solution of Frege's puzzle.

In essay 9, "Naming and Asserting," I explain in detail why the *Beyond Rigidity* account of semantics and pragmatics has to be revised. According to the updated view, the semantic content of *S* is not always a complete proposition, but rather is a set of conditions that constrains the candidates for assertion, while allowing speakers a measure of freedom for pragmatic enrichment within those constraints. On this view, assertions must be pragmatic enrichments of semantic content. When the semantic content of *S* in *C* is a complete proposition it qualifies as a degenerate case of pragmatic enrichment (of itself). However, it counts as asserted by an utterance of *S* only if it is a relevant and obvious consequence of salient presuppositions in *C* plus the (potentially) enriched propositions that the speaker primarily intended to assert. In addition to being independently motivated, this revision is crucial in extending the ability of the Millian to accommodate the pretheoretic intuitions driving Frege's puzzle. The essay closes with illustrations of how the view generalizes to other cases, including indexicals and possessives.

The new conception of meaning as least common denominator is further developed in essay 10, "The Gap between Meaning and Assertion: Why What We Literally Say Often Differs from What Our Words Literally Mean."<sup>8</sup> According to this conception, the semantic content of *S* is that which is common to what is asserted by utterances of *S* in all normal contexts. Although the content of *S* is often a complete proposition,

<sup>8</sup>Delivered in April of 2004 at Pomona College at a conference, "Asserting, Meaning, and Implying," in honor of Jay David Atlas. Originally intended for a conference volume that never materialized, the essay appears in print for the first time here.

and, hence, a proper candidate for being asserted and believed, in some cases it is only a skeleton, or partial specification, of such a proposition. In many contexts, the semantic content of *S*—whether it is a complete proposition or not—interacts with information that is presupposed to generate a pragmatically enriched proposition that it is the speaker’s primary intention to assert. Other propositions count as asserted only when they are relevant, unmistakable, and a priori consequences of the speaker’s primary assertions, together with salient presuppositions of the conversational background. This framework is used to illuminate Kripke’s “Puzzle about Belief,” plus several related problems involving definite descriptions.

Essay 11, “Drawing the Line between Meaning and Implicature—and Relating Both to Assertion,” integrates Gricean conversational maxims into the new semantic-pragmatic model. I argue that, in addition to generating implicatures, the maxims play an important role in determining what is asserted. Sentences containing bare numerical quantifiers—of the form *n Fs*—are used to illustrate the point. The crucial fact is that utterances of these sentences in different contexts result in the assertion of different propositions. Sometimes the content contributed by  $\lceil n Fs \rceil$  to the assertion made by an utterance of a sentence containing it is the same as that of the fully specified quantifier  $\lceil \text{at least } n Fs \rceil$ . At other times it is the content of  $\lceil \text{exactly } n Fs \rceil$ ,  $\lceil \text{at most } n Fs \rceil$ , or  $\lceil \text{up to } n Fs \rceil$ —among others. This isn’t semantic ambiguity. Instead, I argue, the semantic contents of sentences containing bare numerical quantifiers are incomplete, requiring pragmatic enrichment in order to provide a complete proposition to be asserted. Conversational maxims help determine what is asserted by narrowing the class of possible enrichments to those that most effectively advance the conversation. When several enrichments are otherwise feasible, the maxims dictate that the agent select the strongest, most informative, and relevant propositions among them for which the agent can be presumed to have adequate evidence. In this way, the maxims contribute to the truth conditions of (what is said by) utterances, over and above their role in generating conversational implicatures.

This extension of the integrated semantic-pragmatic model has a methodological corollary. In tracing part of the information asserted or conveyed by an utterance to the conversational maxims—instead of the meaning of the sentence uttered—we are showing that the information is rationally extractable from the utterance, together with the *least common denominator* conception of meaning, even if real, nonidealized, speakers don’t employ the maxims either consciously or unconsciously. On this conception, the meaning of a sentence is the minimal information associated with it that must be mastered by a rational agent—over and above the ability to communicate intelligently, efficiently, and cooperatively

with other members of the linguistic community. Consequently, no matter what idiosyncratic processes individual speakers actually go through in extracting information from utterances, the question of what their sentences mean—and of what part of that which is asserted or conveyed is due to meaning, and what part is due to other, pragmatic factors—is determined by idealized rational reconstruction, *not* psychological research. In this way, the integrated semantic-pragmatic model sketched in part 3 extends the nonpsychological conception of linguistic theories articulated in part 2.

It also provides a diagnosis of the problematic source of what has been called “Grice’s paradox.” It is a basic presupposition of the classical Gricean model that the generation of conversational implicatures requires speaker-hearers to have a clear, reliable grasp of the meaning of the sentence uttered, which is closely, and transparently, related to what is said by an utterance of it. If this presupposition were correct, it would seem that we should be able to rely on that grasp to determine whether a piece of information conveyed by an utterance is, or is not, conversationally implicated. If it is part of what is said, this should be recognizable from our understanding of the sentence uttered. If it is conversationally implicated, there should be a canonical derivation demonstrating it to be. Either way, it would seem, there is little room for serious theoretical controversy about what is, and what isn’t, implicated. In point of fact, however, there is no shortage of such controversy. That is Grice’s paradox.

The error leading to the paradox is, I think, that of too closely identifying what is said or asserted by an utterance with the meaning (or semantic content) of the sentence uttered. On the semantic-pragmatic account developed in part 3, semantic content is too theory-laden to be the object of reliable, systematic knowledge on the part of competent speakers. Although Grice-like derivations are crucial to the role of the maxims in determining both what is asserted and what is conversationally implicated, these derivations are not routinely reconstructable by ordinary speakers, because the semantic contents that initiate the derivations are not psychologically available to them, simply by virtue of their linguistic competence.

#### PART 4: DESCRIPTIONS

The next three essays deal with singular definite descriptions, with special focus on incomplete descriptions like ‘the cook’ and ‘the table’—which are often used to assert truths about one particular individual, despite the fact that the world contains many cooks and tables, and nothing in the descriptions distinguishes one from all the rest. Essay 12, “Incomplete

Definite Descriptions,” critiques the lessons drawn from these expressions by Jon Barwise and John Perry for their theory of meaning—*situation semantics*. That theory, roughly put, is what you get by starting with the idea that the proposition semantically expressed by a sentence (relative to a context of utterance) is the set of circumstances in which it comes out true, and insisting that these circumstances are not different possible states of the world as a whole—but different states of parts of the world. Two linguistic constructions that played important roles motivating this approach were propositional attitude ascriptions and incomplete definite descriptions—both of which seemed to require partial circumstances of evaluation to resolve what were then taken to be intractable problems. In essay 1 of volume 2, I argue that, in fact, the problems posed by attitude ascriptions can’t be solved in this way. In essay 12 of this volume, I argue for a similar conclusion about incomplete descriptions.

The guiding idea in the latter case was that true, unproblematic uses of ‘The F is G’, when ‘the F’ is incomplete, require the sentence as a whole to be evaluated in partial circumstances in which the uniqueness condition carried by ‘the’ is satisfied because one and only one thing satisfies F in the circumstances—despite the fact that many things satisfy F in reality as a whole. Essay 12 shows in detail why this idea is incorrect, as originally formulated in Barwise and Perry (1983), and why the modification of the basic framework later given in Barwise and Perry (1985) doesn’t change the result. The central positive conclusion drawn is that the use of incomplete descriptions to assert truths is explained by the contextual supplementation of their contents by salient objects, properties, events, or states of affairs—which render the descriptions contextually complete.<sup>9</sup>

Is this contextual supplementation semantic or pragmatic? At the time, I was inclined to think in some cases—when the utterance of ‘The F is G’ results in the assertion of something true and nothing false—it was semantic. The argument for this, given in note 5 of the essay, was that if the supplementation of the description was pragmatic then, although the speaker could be regarded as saying something true (to which the utterance of the description contributed a completed *assertive* content), the speaker would also have to be regarded as saying something false, since the semantic content of the sentence (to which the description contributed an incomplete *semantic* content) would be false. The unspoken presupposition of this argument was that whatever else may be asserted

<sup>9</sup>Although this conclusion can be implemented within situation semantics, it does not require partial situations as circumstances of evaluations for sentences (as opposed to fully-fledged possible world-states). Thus it removes one of the central motivations for that framework.

by an utterance of *S*, the semantic content of *S* (the proposition it semantically expresses) is always asserted, unless something special about the utterance—irony, sarcasm, or an obviously canceling conversational implicature—indicates otherwise. Though this assumption was standard at the time, it is, of course, rejected by the new conception of the relationship between meaning and assertion developed in part 3. Applying that conception to cases involving incomplete descriptions—the details of which are explained in essays 10 and 14—leads to the conclusion that the needed contextual supplementation of incomplete definite descriptions pointed out in essay 12 is pragmatic, rather than semantic.

This result fits nicely with what I had to say about the distinction between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions. When a description is used referentially, the speaker's utterance results in the assertion of a singular proposition about the real or presumed designation of the description. When it is used attributively no such singular proposition is asserted. In the section "Attributive/Referential" of essay 12, I argued that, contra Barwise and Perry, this distinction does not rest on a semantic ambiguity, but is purely pragmatic. The point is obvious when the singular proposition asserted by a referential use is about the presumed, rather than the real, designation of the term used referentially. Since the pragmatic mechanism at work in these cases doesn't cease to operate when the presumed designation coincides with the semantic one, it is argued that no semantic ambiguity is needed to account for the facts about assertion that characterize referential uses. This point, which naturally generalizes to uses of incomplete definite descriptions, is reprised in essays 10 and 14, where the same mechanisms that explain successful uses of indefinite descriptions also explain the distinction between attributive and referential uses.

Essay 13, "Donnellan's Referential/Attributive Distinction," begins by explicating the contribution made by Keith Donnellan's (1966) introduction of the distinction to the theory of direct reference and the assertion of singular, Russellian propositions. It then returns to the question of semantics versus pragmatics. This time, however, the focus is on cases involving discourse anaphora like those in (1).<sup>10</sup>

- (1) *A man* came to the office this morning. *He / The man* tried to sell me an encyclopedia.

Roughly put, Donnellan's thesis was that the antecedent in (1) is used referentially to pick out a certain individual who is both the *semantic* referent and content of the pronoun or description that is anaphoric on it in the

<sup>10</sup>These are discussed in Donnellan (1978).

discourse. In cases like this, he argued, descriptions (like ‘the man’) are directly referential terms the contents of which are the individuals that speakers use them, referentially, to pick out. I maintained—based on considerations parallel to those Donnellan (1979) himself used in another connection—that this was not so. Instead, I suggested, the anaphoric terms are to be understood along the lines first proposed by Gareth Evans (1977), and later refined by Martin Davies (1981) and Stephen Neale (1990).

Essay 14, “Why Incomplete Definite Descriptions Don’t Refute Russell’s Theory of Descriptions,” is the latest, and most complete, statement of my views on incomplete descriptions. There, I defend a modified version of Russell’s theory of descriptions in which ‘the F’ is treated as a generalized quantifier, and sentences containing it are assigned Russellian truth conditions. The task is to explain why this theory is not defeated by successful uses of incomplete definite descriptions, when it is taken as a semantic account of ordinary English. Doing this requires the conception of meaning as *least common denominator*, and the resulting distinction between *what a sentence means in the common language* versus *what a speaker means by it, and uses it to assert, on a given occasion*.

As I emphasize in the essay, this was not how Russell himself looked at the matter. His main task was not to give a theory of the meaning of sentences in the common language of a linguistic community, but to specify what an individual means in using those sentences on a given occasion. From this individualistic perspective, incomplete definite descriptions don’t pose serious problems. Since pragmatic enrichment of utterances is ubiquitous, *what a speaker means* by a superficially incomplete description ‘the F’ on a given occasion is typically not incomplete. From this perspective, the fact that the assertive content of ‘the F is G’ differs widely from speaker to speaker, and context to context—and is considerably richer than the semantic content of the sentence in the common language—is of no particular concern. It becomes a concern only when one tries to give a semantic theory of what that content is, and how it relates to what the sentence is used to assert on particular occasions. To adopt a Russellian theory of descriptions in a semantic theory of this sort, one must not, I argue, assume that when speakers assertively utter a sentence S containing an incomplete description, they mean, and assert, the proposition that is the semantic content of S (in the context). Instead, they typically assert a proposition which is a pragmatic enrichment of that content.

An alternative view—to which I devote a little, but not enough, attention in essays 10 and 14—agrees that contextual supplementation is the key to understanding successful uses of incomplete descriptions, but argues that it cannot be pragmatic. Instead, the view maintains, such supplementation must be understood as the contextual filling out of a hidden semantic parameter. The key argument for this view, given

by Jason Stanley (2000, 2002), comes from apparent instances of variable-binding, like those in (2) and (3).

- (2) Every student answered every question.
- (3) Every student answered every question *on her exam*.

Consider a case in which (2) is uttered with the intention of asserting (what is expressed by) (3). Stanley argues that this can't come from free pragmatic enrichment, but rather results from the contextual interpretation of a hidden underlying variable. On his view, the underlying logical structure of (2) is something along the lines of (4).

- (4) [Every student  $x$ ][Every question  $y$ :  $f(x)$ ]  $x$  answered  $y$

The context in question supplies the interpretation of 'f'—assigning it a function from individuals to the property of being *on the individual's exam*. The effect is to give the interpretation *is a question on  $x$ 's exam* to the formula restricting the range of the second quantifier. Thus, after contextual interpretation, (2) semantically expresses the same proposition as (3). Stanley's point, apparently, is that since the proposition expressed by (2) in the context is one that can arise only from interpreting linguistic material containing a variable bound by the initial quantifier, (2) itself must contain that linguistic material in logical form. This can be so only if occurrences of nouns are quite generally accompanied by hidden variables of this sort. Thus, (6) is the underlying logical structure of (5), and the need for contextual completion is built into the linguistic structure of all relevant examples.

- (5) Every bottle is in the fridge.
- (6) [Every bottle  $y$ :  $f(y)$ ]  $y$  is in the fridge.

Why, even if this were so, contextual enrichment could not be pragmatic is, I think, not fully clear. Even less clear, however, is why the use of (2) to assert the proposition expressed by (3) should require a hidden variable in logical structure. Stanley's argument for this seems to depend on the idea that what needs to be added to (2) to get the proposition expressed by (3) *is not an independent semantic unit*, but rather is something that interacts semantically with an operator that is already syntactically represented.

Since the supposed unarticulated constituent [what needs to be added to get the content of (3) from (2)] is not the value of anything in the sentence uttered, *there should be no readings of the relevant linguistic constructions in which the unarticulated constituent varies with the values introduced by operators in the sentence uttered*. Operators in a sentence can only interact with variables in the sentence that lie within

their scope. . . . Thus . . . [the] interpretation [of the unarticulated constituent] cannot be controlled by operators in the sentence. (Stanley 2000, 410–11; my emphasis)<sup>11</sup>

The point here seems to be that what needs to be added to (2) to get the interpretation (3) is not a single semantic value, but a formula, ‘is on x’s exam’, the semantic value of which varies with different assignments to ‘x’. Because of this, Stanley thinks, pragmatic enrichment cannot result from pragmatically enriching a constituent of the structured proposition semantically expressed by the hidden-variable-free formula (7).

(7) [Every student x] [Every question y] x answered y

Thus, he assumes, if pragmatic enrichment were to occur at all, it would have to involve adding *extra words* to interact with the words and phrases already there. After giving arguments against this, he concludes that since pragmatic enrichment of (2) cannot explain the use of (2) to assert the proposition expressed by (3), (2) must itself have a hidden variable in logical structure requiring contextual interpretation.

This argument is flawed in several ways.<sup>12</sup> The most important point, for our purposes, is that it is perfectly possible to get the proposition expressed by (3) by pragmatically enriching the proposition semantically expressed by (2)—on the hypothesis that the logical structure of (2) is given by (7), rather than (4). On this hypothesis, the structured proposition semantically expressed by (2) is a complex consisting of the higher-order property expressed by the quantifier ‘[every student x]’ plus the property contributed by the formula ‘[Every question y] x answered y’ to which it attaches.<sup>13</sup> The former is the property of being instantiated by every instantiator of the property of being a student (i.e.,

<sup>11</sup>Note, at the beginning of the passage the unarticulated constituent is spoken of as a kind of content, or semantic value; at the end it is spoken of as a linguistic constituent that gets semantic values. This conflation contributes to the confusion in the argument.

<sup>12</sup>At bottom, I suspect it involves a misunderstanding of quantification. In standard semantics, the truth-value of a quantified formula  $\lceil Qx (Rxy) \rceil$ , relative to an assignment A, is computed not from the extension of  $\lceil Rxy \rceil$ , relative to A, but from its extension relative to a class of assignments related to A. As a result, extension is not strictly compositional. A similar remark holds for semantic content. This may make it appear as if occurrences of formulas to which quantifiers attach don’t contribute properties to the semantic contents of larger quantified formulas (relative to assignments). However, this is a mistake. In general, an occurrence of such a formula contributes a property P (or something that determines P), of which the higher-order property contributed by the quantifier occurrence is predicated. There is no bar to pragmatically enriching a proposition of this sort; one simply replaces P by some enrichment  $P^*$  of it. For an explanation of the technical points about quantification, see Salmon (2006a, 2006b).

<sup>13</sup>This talk of properties can be treated as Russellian functions from arguments to structured propositions about those arguments, along the lines indicated in essay 5.

being instantiated by every student). The latter is the property of being one who answered every question. Pragmatic enrichment consists in replacing the latter property with an enriched—more restricted—version of it. In this case, the enriched property is that of being one who answered every question on one’s exam. No new variables or any other words are introduced. We simply have an operation on contents. Thus, Stanley’s variable-binding argument, on which he places so much weight, has no force against the view of pragmatic enrichment advocated here.

Much more beyond this (plus the hints sketched in essays 10 and 14) would have to be said to establish that the pragmatic view is definitely superior to Stanley’s contextually semantic approach. However, it may be worth mentioning a final point to which I attach some weight. The semantic content of a sentence—including (8)—can be, but does not have to be, thought of as a proposition.

(8) Every F is G.

Instead, it can be treated as a set of constraints requiring the proposition asserted to be one in which some restriction/enrichment of the property of being instantiated by everything that instantiates  $F_p$  (the property expressed by F) is predicated of some restriction/enrichment of  $G_p$  (the property expressed by G).<sup>14</sup> Whenever we have a quantifier phrase we get a constraint on what is asserted requiring some contextually relevant restriction/enrichment of the semantic content of that phrase. In Stanley’s system this is reflected in having one or more hidden domain variables inserted into every quantifier phrase—*no matter how much the range of the quantifier has already been restricted by the linguistic material that is overtly present*. That strikes me as redundant. Suppose we have a very long restricting clause that appears overtly on the quantifier. Of course, no matter how long it is, we could have always said more, but surely this is no reason to think that we have in effect already said more by including unpronounced variables in our sentence.

## PART 5: MEANING AND USE

Essay 15, “Interpreting Legal Texts: What Is, and What Is Not, Special about the Law,” applies lessons learned from the study of language to a question the resolution of which has practical consequences for our lives. Most prominent among these lessons are those involving the nondescriptivity of names, natural kind terms, and other expressions previously thought to be definable, the gap between meaning and assertion, and a

<sup>14</sup>We here let every property count as a (vacuous) restriction/enrichment of itself.

new understanding of vague terms. The essay incorporates these lessons into a model for (i) determining the content of positive law from the linguistic texts used to enact it, and the circumstances surrounding its enactment, and (ii) the principles used to derive legally correct results about particular cases from the content of the governing law.

The content of a law is what is asserted or stipulated by the lawmakers in adopting the legal text. As with assertion (or stipulation) generally, this content is only partially determined by the linguistic meaning of the relevant text. Other factors include the purposes, presuppositions, and communicative intentions of the relevant actors. It is shown how, in particular legal cases, failure to take these factors into account—and thereby to conflate *what a legal text means* with *what it is used to assert or stipulate*—leads to the content of the law being misidentified, and to the cases being wrongly decided.

One example of this sort involves referential uses of language—on analogy with referential uses of descriptions discussed in essays 10 and 12–14. In these cases, lawmakers or other rule makers assert or stipulate something about particular things they have in mind, over and above the semantic contents of the sentences they use (which may, or may not, themselves be asserted or stipulated). In a different kind of case, lawmakers use sentences the semantic contents of which are incomplete, and require contextual supplementation. For example, suppose that, in passing a law, the lawmakers say, “The use of firearms within city limits is prohibited.” Whenever an instrument is used, it must, of course, be used in some way, or for some purpose. However, the *meaning* of the lawmakers’ sentence is silent about which uses are to be prohibited. To determine this crucial aspect of the law, one must ascertain what uses the lawmakers understood themselves to be prohibiting.

The mistake to be avoided is in thinking that because the linguistic meaning of ‘the use of firearms’ is minimal and nonspecific, its contribution to what they asserted or stipulated must also be minimal and nonspecific—something along the lines of ‘the use of firearms in any way’. Although one could, in very special contexts, use the sentence to forbid all uses of firearms—including as wall decorations, subjects of photographs, museum exhibits, and the like—more normally the sentence would be used to prohibit firearms *as weapons*. Thus, to interpret the law one must consult not just linguistic meaning, but also communicative intent. This point, though obvious from a correct understanding of the relationship between meaning and assertion, has proven too difficult for some of our highest courts.

Part (ii) of the model examines how legally correct resolutions of particular cases are related to the content of the governing law. Here the main points of interest are the ways in which legal interpretation may

justifiably create new law. Surprising as it may initially seem, sometimes the content of existing law—that which the lawmakers have asserted or stipulated—determines an outcome that is legally *incorrect* in a particular case. The reason for this, I argue, lies in a proviso giving judges (and other officials) authority to make minor adjustments in law to avoid transparently undesirable results in cases not previously contemplated. Although explicitness in formulating laws is desirable, it is impossible to anticipate every eventuality, and, inevitably, one reaches a point of diminishing returns. Recognizing this, we implicitly give judges a limited prerogative to make changes in the law they interpret. In this respect legal interpretation is special, and different from other ways of interpreting texts.

Another way in which legal interpretation sometimes creates new laws occurs when the resolution of a case requires deciding issues that had previously been left vague. Often, this occurs when some crucial term in a legal text is governed by linguistic rules that determine items to which it applies and items to which it does not apply, while being silent about a range of intermediate items. If the case at hand involves a crucial item for which the term is undefined, and if the lawmakers themselves did not adopt a special contextual standard resolving the indeterminacy, the court itself is called upon to do so. Although there are linguistic and other constraints on how this can, legitimately, be done, there is typically a range of freedom within which judges have discretion. The exercise of this discretion is justified by the fact that the court has no alternative, if it is to decide the case at all, and by the fact that legislators are well aware of this aspect of adjudication, and often deliberately employ vague language with future judicial precisification in mind—thereby implicitly ceding limited legislative authority to courts.

## CONCLUSION

There was a time, just a few decades ago, when philosophy and the philosophical study of language were thought to be one and the same. Then, every significant philosophical question was thought to be a linguistic question. Thankfully, that is no longer so. Although the philosophy of language still has much to contribute to every area of philosophy, its main contemporary focus—and that of the essays in this volume—is on what it can tell us about language, representation, cognition, and communication, as independent, but interrelated, subjects in their own right. This development is part of a story that is as old as philosophy itself. At the birth of the discipline, the study of philosophy and the pursuit of theoretical knowledge were essentially one and the same. Over time, one discipline

after another gradually emerged from its philosophical womb, and matured into an independent field of study. The most notable example in the last century was symbolic logic. Today, linguistic semantics and pragmatics, cognitive science, and the general study of language and information are struggling to emerge as productive and interconnected areas of scientific inquiry. The philosophical study of language has a central role to play in the development of this exciting, but still embryonic, intellectual enterprise. More than any other, this is the enterprise to which the essays in this volume have aspired to make contributions.

## REFERENCES

- Bach, Kent. 1994. "Conversational Implicature." *Mind and Language* 9:124–62.
- Barwise, Jon, and John Perry. 1983. *Situations and Attitudes*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- . 1985. "Shifting Situations and Shaken Attitudes." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 8:105–61.
- Beaver, David. 2000. *Presupposition and Assertion in Dynamic Semantics*. Stanford, Calif.: CSLI Publications.
- Carston, Robyn. 2002. *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Davies, Martin. 1981. *Meaning, Quantification, and Necessity*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Donnellan, Keith S. 1966. "Reference and Definite Descriptions." *Philosophical Review* 75:281–304.
- . 1978. "Speaker Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora." In *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 9, *Pragmatics*, ed. Peter Cole, 47–68. New York: Academic Press.
- . 1979. "The Contingent Apriori and Rigid Designators." In *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, and Howard K. Wettstein, 12–27. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Evans, Gareth. 1977. "Pronouns, Quantifiers, and Relative Clauses (I)." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7:467–536.
- Kripke, Saul A. n.d. "Presupposition and Anaphora: Remarks on the Formulation of the Projection Problem." Unpublished manuscript, City University of New York, Graduate Center.
- Neale, Stephen. 1990. *Descriptions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- . 2007. "On Location." In *Situating Semantics: Essays on the Philosophy of John Perry*, ed. Michael O'Rourke and Corey Washington, 251–393. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Recanati, François. 1993. *Direct Reference*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 2003. *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richard, Mark. 1993. "Articulated Terms." In *Language and Logic*, ed. James E. Tomberlin, 207–30. Philosophical Perspectives 7. Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview.

- Salmon, Nathan. 2006a. "Terms in Bondage." *Philosophical Issues* 16, no. 1: 263–74.
- . 2006b. "A Theory of Bondage." *Philosophical Review* 115:415–48.
- Soames, Scott. 1982. "How Presuppositions Are Inherited: A Solution to the Projection Problem." *Linguistic Inquiry* 13:483–545.
- . 2002. *Beyond Rigidity: The Unfinished Semantic Agenda of "Naming and Necessity."* New York: Oxford University Press.
- . n.d. "What Are Natural Kinds." Forthcoming in *Philosophical Topics*.
- Stanley, Jason. 2000. "Context and Logical Form." *Linguistics and Philosophy* 23:391–434.
- . 2002. "Making It Articulated." *Mind and Language* 17:149–68.