# The Propositions We Assert

**Abstract:** According to Scott Soames, proper names have no descriptive meaning. Nonetheless, Soames maintains that proper names are typically used to make descriptive assertions. In this paper, I challenge Soames' division between meaning and what is asserted, first by arguing that competent speakers *always* make descriptive assertions with name-containing sentences, and then by defending an account of proper name meaning that accommodates this fact.

**Keywords:** Proper names, descriptions, assertion, propositions, meaning

In recent work, Scott Soames has argued that, although speakers typically use proper names to make descriptive assertions, proper names have no descriptive meaning (2002, 2005, 2006, 2008). Soames endorses a *least common denominator* conception of meaning, on which the meaning of a sentence S is "…what is common to what is asserted by utterances of S in all normal contexts in which it is used literally" (2008). Since, for any proper name *N*, no particular descriptive content will be common to all assertions made with sentences containing *N*, Soames concludes that proper name meaning must be wholly non-descriptive.

In this paper, I argue that, in making the case for descriptive assertion, Soames actually provides evidence that names have descriptive meaning. I then offer an account of name meaning that better accommodates descriptive assertion.

## 1. Soames on assertion, meaning, and competence

Soames maintains that speakers typically use sentences that contain names – for example, "Aristotle was a philosopher" – to assert descriptive propositions – for example, ***Aristotle, the Greek who taught Alexander the Great, was a philosopher***. If two speakers have associated different descriptive information with a name, they can make distinct assertions even though they utter the very same sentence, and if they have associated the same descriptive information with distinct names, they may well make the same descriptive assertion with distinct sentences.

Speakers attend to their assertions when they are asked about sentence meaning; as Soames puts it: "[w]hen ordinary speakers are asked whether two sentences mean the same thing…they often focus on what *they* typically would use the sentences to assert and convey in various contexts…whether *they* would typically mean the same thing by the two sentences in particular cases…." (2008). It is such focus on what she would assert, according to Soames,

that leads a speaker to conclude that sentences containing co-referential names, such as "Aristotle was a philosopher" and "Aristotelis was a philosopher," differ in meaning.

But Soames' position is that ordinary speakers are wrong: the sentences actually have the *same* meaning "in the common language of their community" (2008). This is because the same content – a certain man, and the property of being a philosopher – appears in all propositions expressed by assertive utterances of "Aristotle was a philosopher" and "Aristotelis was a philosopher". Similarly, the names "Aristotle" and "Aristotelis" have their (same) referent as sole semantic value; though speakers typically use the names to make different descriptive assertions, no particular descriptive information is part of all such assertions, and so the names have no descriptive meaning.

Soames can be confident that a name's referent is always part of what is asserted by competent uses of that name, since he has defined competence, in part, as using a name with referential intentions that determine its (single, correct) referent.[1] Since only utterances by competent speakers are to be considered when applying the "least common denominator" criterion of meaning, it is of course not surprising that Soames concludes that the referent of any (non-empty) name is always part of what is asserted by utterances of that name by competent speakers.

In the next two sections, I will challenge Soames' neat division between meaning and assertion, first by showing that Soames' own presentation best supports the conclusion that speakers *always* – and not "typically," as he maintains – make descriptive assertions with name-containing sentences, and then by using this result to cast doubt on Soames' criteria of meaning and linguistic competence. In the final section, I develop alternative criteria that are more in line with actual speaker practice to show that proper names do, in fact, have descriptive meaning.

## 2. Judgments of meaning difference and belief reports

Soames appeals to the phenomenon of descriptive assertion in order to resolve two problems for his position that the sole semantic value of a proper name is its referent: (a) the fact that seemingly competent speakers take

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[1] "In order to be a competent user of a linguistically simple name n of an object o … one must have acquired a referential intention that determines o as the referent of n. This may be done by picking up n and intending to use it with the standard meaning-reference it has already acquired in the language due to the baptisms, authoritative stipulations, and referential uses of others" (2005). In addition, one must realize that to assertively utter a sentence like "Aristotle was a philosopher" is to say of Aristotle that he was a philosopher. Soames initially claimed that to say of Aristotle that he was a philosopher is simply to assert the singular proposition that attributes philosopher-hood to Aristotle (2002). His (2005) offered a modification – competent speakers "construct their assertions" around "the skeleton" of a bare singular proposition (which they need not assert) – but inclusion of a name's referent in the proposition that one uses the name to assert remained as a necessary condition of competence with a name.

sentences that differ only in the substitution of a coreferential name to differ in meaning, and (b) the fact that seemingly rational speakers use coreferential names, "A" and "B," to utter sentences of the form: "I believe that A is F, and I do not believe that B is F."[2] His discussion is not, however, wholly satisfactory. Soames accounts for (a) by telling us that speakers take the descriptive proposition(s) that they (would) assert with a sentence to be the meaning of that sentence. And yet he also tells us that speakers identify the proposition that they would assert with a sentence only after taking into account contexts of use, conversational purposes, the assumptions of conversational participants, etc. It is not clear how to reconcile these two claims, since speakers who are asked to consider the meaning of a non-indexical expression do not appear to reach their verdicts by way of determining what would be useful or appropriate to assert in various contexts. Furthermore, though Soames claims that speakers "typically" use names to make descriptive assertions, his discussion of (b) suggests that speakers *always* associate descriptive information with proper names.

## a. Meaning difference, coreferential names

As noted above, Soames claims that speakers, when asked about sentence meaning, "…often focus on what *they* typically would use the sentences to assert and convey in various contexts, or what information *they* typically would gather from assertive utterances of them" (2008). This is how he accounts for the fact that speakers typically judge sentences containing co-referential names to differ in meaning: "in virtually all contexts in which the sentences might be assertively uttered, speakers in those contexts would use them to assert and convey *different* information" (2008).

David Braun and Ted Sider (2006) claim that, on Soames' account of descriptive assertion, a speaker who associated with "Aristotle" the descriptive information **the teacher of Alexander** could utter the sentence

(A) It is necessary that: (If Aristotle exists, then) Aristotle taught Alexander

and say something true. But, Braun and Sider maintain, "…there is no context in which A seems true." Thus, Soames' account of descriptive assertion must be wrong.

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[2] In his (2006), Soames characterizes his (2002) discussion as "…the attempt to use pragmatic descriptive enrichment to reconcile semantic Millianism with seemingly anti-Millian intuitions about how substitution of (linguistically simple) coreferential names in sentences can change their 'cognitive values,' and with the apparently different truth values of attitude ascriptions containing such sentences."

Soames acknowledges that "it is very hard to imagine any natural context in which an utterance of A would result in the assertion of a truth," but he maintains that this is not a problem for his view, because "the nature of descriptive enrichment itself" prevents speakers from using A to make a true assertion (2006).[3] In particular, Soames claims that descriptive enrichment "exists to serve conversational purposes," and that no conversational purpose whatsoever could be served by an assertion of *If Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander, existed, then Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander, taught Alexander*; to descriptively enrich the proposition *If Aristotle existed, then Aristotle taught Alexander* with the descriptive content *the teacher of Alexander* to is to "render the assertion trivial, uninformative, and redundant" (2006). Soames continues:

> It is easy to see why, in normal contexts in which A might be uttered, *Aristotle* will not be pragmatically enriched by the addition of the property of being the teacher of Alexander. In order for such enrichment to take place it must be taken for granted by conversational participants, and so go without saying, that the referent of *Aristotle* was the teacher of Alexander…if C is a normal conversational context in which A is assertively uttered, we may take it that it is **not** already assumed in C that the referent of *Aristotle* was the teacher of Alexander, and hence that the utterance of the name is **not** pragmatically enriched by the addition of the property of being the teacher of Alexander. (2006)

Thus, he concludes: "the particular pragmatic enrichment envisioned by Braun and Sider does not occur here."

In his response to Braun and Sider, Soames seems to move from the claim that

> (i) a proposition that would not serve a conversational purpose in any context would not be asserted in any context

to the conclusion that

> (ii) if a speaker would not use a sentence S to assert a proposition P in any context, then that speaker would not judge P to be the meaning of S (in any context)

However, it is not clear that his account of assertion and meaning judgments licenses this inference. Consider the example of someone who *just* knows one thing about Aristotle: that he taught Alexander. (We can take this person to be like a speaker described by Kripke: "He knows that Feynman was a famous physicist…He doesn't know what a Feynman diagram is, he doesn't know what the Feynman theory of pair production and annihilation is. Not only that: he'd have trouble distinguishing between Gell-Mann and Feynman" (1972).) He is asked: "What do you know about Aristotle?" and responds: "Aristotle taught Alexander."

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[3] Identifying – let alone accounting for – speaker judgments about necessity and necessary truth is a difficult matter. A speaker who is asked: "Is it necessary that Aristotle taught Alexander?" may have conflicting intuitions. She may find herself answering in the negative if the question is reframed in one way - "Could Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander, have failed to be the teacher of Alexander?" - and in the affirmative with a different framing: "Could the teacher of Alexander Aristotle have failed to be the teacher of Alexander?"

It may well be redundant to assert ***Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander, taught Alexander***, but such an assertion is surely no *less* informative, or *more* trivial, than the assertion ***Aristotle taught Alexander***. The speaker certainly might wish to have more exciting information with which to enrich his reply on this occasion, but, since he doesn't, no conversational harm appears to result from his inclusion of that one trusty piece of descriptive content.

Soames might nonetheless insist that speakers just don't make such redundant enrichments to the propositions that they assert. Suppose that we grant him this. Let us now imagine that our meagerly informed speaker is asked if the sentences "Aristotle taught Alexander" and "Aristotelis taught Alexander" differ in meaning. Because he has associated with "Aristotle" only the descriptive information ***teacher of Alexander***, and with "Aristotelis" only the descriptive information ***student of Plato***, he maintains that the sentences have different meanings. The speaker may be unable to imagine a conversational circumstance in which he would want to assert ***Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander, taught Alexander*** – but this does not prevent him from attending to the difference between that proposition and the one that he would assert with "Aristotelis taught Alexander" in order to reach his verdict about meaning difference. Indeed, that difference in descriptive information is presumably what he would be sensitive to whenever he chose to utter "Aristotelis taught Alexander" rather than "Aristotle taught Alexander".

We should remember that it is Soames, and not the typical speaker, who maintains a divide between the meaning of a name and the descriptive information that contributes to asserted propositions. On Soames' own account, speakers take the descriptive information that they associate with a name to be part of the name's meaning; we should thus not expect a speaker who sincerely aims to identify the meaning of a name-containing sentence to take her options to be limited to propositions that she might assert, or that might serve a conversational purpose.

Consider what normally happens when a speaker is asked to reflect on the meaning of a sentence, or to compare it to the meaning of a different sentence. Take as an example someone who has, on several past occasions, uttered sentences containing the words "blockhead" and "numbskull". When this speaker is asked whether "blockhead" differs in meaning from "numbskull," he arrives at his answers by reflecting on what he has used the words to assert on past occasions. Now, our subject holds his good friend Sully in extremely high regard, to the extent that he is unable to imagine Sully ever making a single misstep. Inevitably, he is asked about the sentence "Sully is a blockhead": is it true? Does it differ in meaning from "Sully is a numbskull"? Of course, this speaker would never assertively utter either of these sentences, and indeed cannot conceive of a possible context in which

*anyone* would do so (as he believes that everyone must share his views about Sully). But the reason that he insists: "*No one* would *ever* say that!" is that he knows what he *would say* if he were to utter "Sully is a blockhead."

If we recognize that speakers use names to make descriptive assertions, and take the descriptive content that they use names to assert to be part of the meaning of those names, then we should not expect their meaning judgments to be particularly sensitive to pragmatic considerations. There is no special difficulty involved in accepting that *if* one were to assertively utter a sentence ("Aristotle is Aristotle"), one would say something trivial and uninformative (and so concluding that in no context would conversational goals be furthered by such an utterance – "Why would I say *that?*"), while at the same time attending to just that uninformative content in order to make judgments about meaning ("Aristotle is Aristotle" and "Aristotelis is Aristotelis" differ in meaning; both express necessary truths; etc.).

## b. Belief ascription with coreferential names

In his (2008), Soames discusses the example of Peter, who utters "I believe that Paderewski has great musical talent" and "I don't believe that Paderewski has great musical talent." Soames recognizes that Peter cannot both believe, and not believe, the singular proposition involving only Paderewski and his possession of great musical talent – as he puts it, "…the propositions semantically expressed by these examples can't all be true." Nevertheless, "…it is natural to understand each of Peter's utterances as saying something true, and nothing false." We can so understand things if we take Peter to be reporting his belief and lack of belief in distinct descriptive propositions: by uttering "I believe that Paderewski has great musical talent," Peter asserts the proposition ***Peter believes that Paderewski, the musician, has great musical talent***, and with "I don't believe that Paderewski has great musical talent," Peter asserts ***Peter does not believe that Paderewski, the statesman, has great musical talent***.

Soames thus suggests that, on his view, when a speaker S (who is presumably otherwise competent) affirms and denies a single name-containing sentence of the form "I believe that A is F," or assertively utters "I believe that A is F" and "I do not believe that B is F," when A is B, S is reporting his belief and lack of belief in distinct descriptive propositions. Accepting this is, I think, tantamount to an acknowledgment that *all* belief ascriptions made with name-containing sentences are partly descriptive. This is because, for any case in which a competent speaker S says "I believe that A is F," it will be possible to generate a 'counterpart' instance, in which S utters the sentence "I don't believe that B is F," and A is B.

Imagine, for example, that a speaker who is optimally situated to assert a singular proposition utters "I believe that Sully is an inspiration." Since she is in the best possible circumstance for singular assertion, *either* she has indeed asserted a singular proposition, *or* she has asserted a descriptive proposition – in which case, proper names are always used to make descriptive assertions. On some later occasion, also ideal for singular proposition assertion, our speaker utters "I don't believe that Chesley is an inspiration." Chesley and Sully are, however, one and the same person – the pilot Chesley Burnett "Sully" Sullenberger, who landed a commercial airliner in the Hudson River in January of 2009. Our speaker cannot both believe, and not believe, the same singular proposition, and there is no reason to suppose that one of her assertions is true and the other false. We thus cannot account for our speaker as a believer if we insist that she has made two singular assertions; instead, we should echo Soames' verdict about Peter, and conclude that our speaker has reported her belief and lack of belief in distinct descriptive propositions.

We should, then, say that a speaker S who produces an utterance of the form "I believe that A is F" has said something true iff she has asserted a proposition in which S stands in the belief relation to a particular descriptive proposition. In order for some *other* speaker to make a true assertion about S's belief, the speaker would need to assert that same proposition. And so it appears that all true belief reports will involve an assertion that the belief relation holds between a subject and a descriptive proposition.

Furthermore, the considerations that support the position that true assertions made with sentences of the form "I believe that A is F" always involve a relation between a believer and a descriptive proposition also indicate that assertions made with sentences of the form "A is F" are descriptive. In saying "I believe that Paderewski has musical talent," Peter reports that he stands in the belief relation to a proposition; in saying "Paderewski has musical talent," Peter asserts that proposition. If the former is descriptive, then the latter must be as well.

In sum: if accounting for speakers' name-involving meaning verdicts and belief reporting practices requires an appeal to descriptive propositions, then we should accept that descriptive information *always* accompanies use of a proper name. In the next section, I will argue that, given that this is so, descriptive information is part of name meaning (and not, as Soames maintains, mere "pragmatic enrichment").

## 3. Descriptive meaning for proper names

As noted in section 1, Soames affirms a "least common denominator" conception of meaning, and claims that, for any (non-empty) proper name, its referent will appear in all propositions asserted with it, while any

*particular* description will be missing from at least some such propositions. Crucially, Soames applies his least common denominator standard only to assertions made by competent speakers, and he deems a speaker incompetent if she uses a name without a referent-determining intention.

The discussion in the previous section should motivate us to revisit Soames' account of meaning and competence. In particular, we need to figure out how the conditions for competence should accommodate the fact that speakers associate descriptive information with a name and attend to that information when assessing whether a sentence containing that name does or does not differ in meaning from a sentence in which a different name has been substituted.

As a first suggestion: let us suppose that, to be competent, a speaker would need to accompany her use of a name *N* with some *particular* descriptive information – for example, the descriptive information most commonly associated with *N* in her speech community. That particular descriptive information would, then, be part of what is asserted by all competent users of *N*, and so application of Soames' least common denominator criterion of meaning would yield the verdict that every proper name has a particular descriptive meaning.

This proposed competence condition is not, however, very plausible. It would classify as incompetent speakers who use a name-containing sentence in ways that seem in all relevant respects to be just as good as those to whom it would bestow the status of competence. For example: two people could utter sentences containing "Aristotle" to make descriptive assertions involving the same individual and some descriptive information that is true of that individual, and one could meet the standard for competence while the other did not. But, presumably, what we want a condition of competence to articulate is a substantive feature which, if absent, would leave a speaker unable to complete some basic name-involving transaction(s) with other members of his linguistic community.

I believe that Soames' own discussion of descriptive assertion reveals that his competence condition is unsatisfactory in this regard. Though Soames maintains that speakers typically associate descriptions with names, use names to make descriptive assertions, and attend to those descriptive assertions when determining the meaning of names or name-containing sentences, his criterion of competence includes no mention of descriptions. But surely, to imagine a person who has associated *no* descriptive information with a proper name *N* is to imagine someone who is limited in fundamental ways with respect to *N*. Such a person could not use *N* to make a descriptive assertion; if asked: "Who is N?" she could give no useful answer; and she would have no basis upon which to judge whether a sentence containing *N* differs in meaning from a sentence containing a different name.

In light of this, I propose that, in order to be competent with a name *N*, a speaker (i) must use *N* with an intention sufficient to determine its referent, and (ii) must associate with *N* some descriptive information that – in line with Soames' position that the referent of a name "constrains" what a speaker can assert with that name – is true of the referent of *N*.[4] Though no *particular* descriptive information will appear in all assertions made by competent speakers who use a name, we can nonetheless connect our expectation that a competent speaker will associate descriptive information with a name to an account of proper name meaning:[5]

> **Competence:** To be competent with a name *N*, a speaker must use it with an intention that determines the referent of *N*, and must have associated with *N* some descriptive information that is true of that referent.

> **Meaning:** The meaning of a proper name *N on an occasion of use* is the object **o** to which it refers and the particular descriptive information, true of **o**, that the user of *N* has associated with it; the meaning of *N in the language* is **o** and the totality of descriptive information that is true of **o**. (So: co-referential names will have the same meaning in the language, but may differ in meaning on occasions of use.)

On my proposal, the meaning of a name in the language reflects what any competent user of the name could use it to assert . Though it is unlikely that an individual speaker would (or could) assert a proposition containing the in-the-language semantic value of the name that she utters, it is nonetheless the case that a name's contribution to content on an occasion of use is a matter of meaning.

This picture, I think, more accurately renders the relationship between (and speaker judgments involving) meaning and asserted content than does the view defended by Soames. As just one example of this: while both

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[4] Though Soames acknowledges that he has not fully articulated "…constraints on what constitutes a *proper pragmatic enrichment of the semantic content of a sentence*" (2008), his examples of proper descriptive assertions all involve what speakers *know* about referents ("Many speakers would know something about his philosophy…some would know what he looked like at a certain age," etc.; "Because of this, different uses of the sentence…will result in somewhat different assertions…" (2005). Thus, I take a proper descriptive assertion to be one in which the proposition expressed by the speaker contains both the referent of the name that she has uttered and descriptive information that is true of that referent. My characterization of competence therefore amounts to the claim that someone is a competent user of a name N if and only if she uses N to make proper descriptive assertions.

[5] It is worth considering whether we should recognize as competent a speaker who associates with *N* the descriptive information **called 'N'**. On my account, descriptive information is not involved in determining reference; thus, a speaker's associating **called 'N'** with *N* would not raise the spectre of circularity. Furthermore: a speaker who accompanies his use of *N* with *only* **called 'N'**, and not also by a referential intention sufficient to specify o, would, by my criterion, be counted among the incompetent.

Let us suppose, however, that a speaker uses the name "Aristotle" with an appropriate referential intention, and that the only descriptive information that he associates with the name is **called 'Aristotle'**. It is true that such a speaker would be of rather limited use to anyone who asked: "Who is Aristotle?" But he *would* have recourse to a particular difference in content to justify a verdict that "Aristotle was a philosopher" and "Aristotelis was a philosopher" differ in meaning, (since, presumably, the name "Aristotle" would, on occasions of her use, contribute propositional content different from what would be contributed by a use of "Aristotelis"). Thus, I do not see a reason to exclude **called 'N'** from the descriptive information that a competent speaker might associate with a name. (I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising the question of whether the association of descriptive information like **called 'N'** suffices for competence.)

Soames' and my accounts take a speaker who claims that there is an in-the-language difference in meaning between the sentences "Aristotle was a philosopher" and "Aristotelis was a philosopher" to be in error, Soames tells us that such a speaker goes wrong because she attends to something that is not even part of the meaning of these sentences! In contrast, on my proposal, the speaker recognizes the difference in the sentences' meanings on occasions of use, and on that basis mistakenly takes the sentences to have different meanings in the language.

## 4. Conclusion

In his (2002), Soames offered meaning theorists a general guideline: "…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." My aim in this paper has been to show that the systematic speaker practice of using proper names to make descriptive assertions is just the sort of "convention and commonality" that should be reflected in a semantic theory.

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