Scott Soames has given us a new rich and interesting book in the philosophy of language. One of the basic questions to answer when introducing a book is what genre it belongs to. In this case, a cursory look at its title and table of contents could lead one to believe that it is a philosophy of language introductory textbook. A recurring feature like suggestions for further readings at the end of chapters strengthens the impression. But considered as a textbook, it is far too narrow in the range of topics treated and too idiosyncratic in the choice of philosophers presented and discussed. Vagueness isn’t discussed, speech act theory (except for assertion) isn’t taken up, there is nothing on the communicative intentions program, on rule-following, anti-realism, theoretical terms, conditionals, presupposition and more. Quinean skepticism about meaning is quickly dismissed on p. 4 as having no serious ground. Wittgenstein isn’t mentioned, and neither is Austin, Burge, Evans, Field, Fine, Hempel, Hintikka, Strawson, Williamson, or Crispin Wright, to mention a few. There is a discussion of natural kind terms, but Putnam is mentioned only in the suggestions for further reading. Dummett is mentioned only in the suggestions for further reading on Frege. Looking at the bibliography, we can note that, of the 190 total entries, Soames himself has 30, Nathan Salmon 11, Kripke, Lewis and Stalnaker 8, Davidson and Frege 6, Kent Bach, Carnap, Kaplan, Neale, and Quine 5, and others less.

So it is not really an introductory textbook, and even less so since the general level of difficulty is too high; to understand it, you already need some familiarity with the subject (or a teacher with a lot of time). In the Acknowledgements Soames aptly characterizes the book as his own “vision of where we have been, where we stand today, and where we are, or should be, going in the philosophy of language”. He takes up topics, including historical ones, where he has something substantial to add, usually as a criticism of predecessors or contemporaries, but often with constructive suggestions added. The book presents Scott Soames’s view of what is most important, and what is right (and wrong), in the philosophy of language, from Frege up to 2010. You might find the genre somewhat peculiar, but the book is in keeping with the series it belongs to, edited by Soames himself. More importantly, it is well worth reading for the advanced philosophy of language student and for those interested in Soames’s own contributions to the topics covered.

1Thanks for comments to professor Soames, who inter alia corrected a misunderstanding of his comments on Tarski. Thanks for also for helpful comments to Kathrin Glüer.
These topics, over seven chapters, include the middle Frege, the early Russell, Tarski on truth and logical consequence, the Carnap of the semantic stage, the Davidson program, modality and possible-worlds semantics, apriority and necessity, the nature of propositions, Montague and Kaplan semantics, rigidity and direct reference, indexicality, pragmatic enrichment, and the general nature of linguistic meaning. These are indeed among the most central topics of the area, and Soames offers a coherent overall picture. Moreover, Soames is an excellent writer, always clear and precise in presentation and argument, and with an efficient unobtrusive style. With respect to importance of topic and style of discussion, it is a joy to read. For not being a textbook, many of the presentations of other philosophers are quite detailed, even though invariably compact. The presentations are also in general excellent (e.g. of Montague semantics), although not invariably impeccable. The main interest lies in the discussion parts, and I’ll take up a few.

Many of the discussions concern details of formal semantics, where Soames often criticizes well-known theories, and sometimes proposes alternatives that are meant to avoid problems pointed out. In discussing Frege’s views on belief sentences and indirect sense, Soames unhesitatingly ascribes to Frege acceptance of an infinite hierarchy of indirect senses (p. 14), and notes (as others, notably Davidson, have done) that such a hierarchy creates problems for the learnability of a language. He also offers an alternative theory.

On Soames’s semantic account (pp. 16-17), for a belief sentence of the form
\[
(1) \quad A \text{ believes that } S
\]

the extension of ‘believe’ maps the referents of A and \( \gamma \text{ that } S^\gamma \) on the truth value of \( \gamma A \text{ believes that } S^\gamma \), as is standard. But further, the extension of ‘that’ maps the sense of S on itself, and that is also the referent of \( \gamma \text{ that } S^\gamma \). Soames says that since S, and its parts, retain their ordinary sense and reference, no hierarchy is generated.

An ingenious, simple solution? No. Firstly, the semantics is incomplete, for although it provides the referent for \( \gamma \text{ that } S^\gamma \) as a function of the sense of S, it says nothing of the sense of that expression. Secondly, we will need a sense of the expression for the semantics of iterated belief sentences
\[
(2) \quad B \text{ believes that } A \text{ believes that } S
\]

for in (2) the sense of \( \gamma A \text{ believes that } S^\gamma \) would depend on the sense of \( \gamma \text{ that } S^\gamma \). Thirdly, since sense is supposed to determine reference, the sense of \( \gamma \text{ that } S^\gamma \) cannot be the same as the sense of S, for the reference of \( \gamma \text{ that } S^\gamma \), on Soames’s account, is the sense of S, which is distinct from what is determined by the sense of S, i.e. the reference of
S. Rather, it must be something that contains a mode of presentation of the sense of S, which is exactly Frege's indirect sense of S. Then, since the sense of \( \Box A \) believes that \( S \) depends on the sense of \( \Box A \) that \( S \), which is the same as the indirect sense of S, the sense of \( \Box A \) believes that \( S \) must be the indirect sense of \( \Box A \) believes that \( S \), which then depends on the indirect sense of \( \Box A \) that \( S \) (equalling the Fregean indirect indirect sense of S). And so on. So the hierarchy seems to be with us still, as long as we keep the idea that sense determines reference.

One of Soames's fundamental claims is that despite the great value of modern logic and formal semantics, no analysis of basic notions such as meaning or possibility has been achieved, and not much in terms of elucidation either. Although I have sympathy for the view that formal semantics does not automatically answer philosophical questions, I find Soames's negative claims exaggerated. To take an example, Soames claims that "if semantics studies meaning, Tarski-truth isn't a semantic notion" (p 39). His reason is that a Tarskian truth definition makes the truth predicate eliminable and does not depend on primitive, undefined semantic notions. Hence, we can know what is stated by a T-sentence

\[ (3) \quad s \text{ is true-in-} L \text{ iff } p \]

without knowing anything about the meaning of \( s \). This is of course correct, but it is also correct that if we know that the truth definition satisfies Tarski's condition of material adequacy, (which we do if we know that it is a Tarskian truth definition, since that partly defines what counts as an instance of the T-schema), then we also know that the meaning of the referent of (what replaces) \( s \) is the same as the meaning of (what replaces) \( p \).

Since we know the latter, we also know the former. Soames (half-implicitly) considers this objection (note 7, p. 40) by noting that one can know what is stated by a T-sentence without knowing that the definition it is part of is materially adequate. This is again correct, but it is not obviously relevant.

What Soames requires seems to be that a second-order notion (Tarski-truth) is semantic only if one cannot know a concept that falls under it (the concept expressed by a particular Tarskian truth predicate) without also thereby knowing semantic facts about the object-language that the concept applies to. This seems to me too strong. Consider as an analogy the second-order notion of being Hart-legal: a particular first-order concept \( \phi \) is Hart-legal iff what falls under \( \phi \) is exactly the laws of a country at a time. Now, I can learn such a concept \( \phi \) by an extensional definition: I learn it by means of a list of the rules that fall under it. Even if the list consists exactly of the rules that are legal rules in some country at some time, I will not learn this from the definition. And I may not have
been told that $\phi$ is in fact Hart-legal. Does this show that the notion of being Hart-legal is not itself a *legal* notion? Clearly not, I would say.

Although there is much more that is worth presenting and discussing, because of space limitations I shall end by considering Soames’s view of what meaning is, and some of his main reasons for that view. On p 172, Soames says

> When we show that some proposition $p$ conveyed by an utterance can be generated by the pattern of reasoning characterizing conversational implicature, we show that $p$ is rationally extractable from the utterance, together with a defensibly austere conception of meaning, whether or not real speakers consciously, or unconsciously, follow this route. What guides us is a conception of linguistic meaning as least common denominator. The meaning of an expression is the minimal content that must be associated with it by a rational agent—over and above the agent’s ability to reason intelligently and efficiently—in order to communicate with other members of the linguistic community. The point is not heuristic, but constitutive. This is what meaning is.

The main thrust of this quote is that we can justify an austere semantics despite intuitions that an utterance of a sentence has a richer content than the semantic theory says. We can do this because we can derive the richer asserted content from the meager semantic content by appeal to implicature (cf. principle 14, p. 163). Speakers are notoriously bad at distinguishing semantics from pragmatics even in their own utterances. Therefore, the intuitions of ordinary speakers are weak guides to semantic content. And this, in turn, leaves room for justifying more austere semantic theories, e.g. that proper names are rigid designators (chapter 4).

I partly agree with the general strategy: as theorists we must find a pair of semantic theory and pragmatic theory that jointly best accounts for communicated content in a systematic way, and across many different contexts and constructions. And there is nothing wrong, a priori, with being semantically austere, either.

What I find problematic is that Soames pays no attention to the ability of the semantic+pragmatic theory to explain the rate of success of linguistic communication. If all we require is that a particular content can be “rationally extracted” by means of some semantic hypothesis together with reasoning characteristic of conversational implicature, and there are no further restrictions with respect to what speakers and hearers actually are disposed to do, and able to do, given their cognitive habits and limitations, the result may well be an implausible semantics combined with an equally implausible pragmatics, even if both are rational from some point of view or other. For instance, if we do not take our actual computational limitations into account, what would be wrong in
accepting a recursive semantics where the complexity of semantic processing increases exponentially with the size of the sentence?

A related point can be made for the pragmatics of definite descriptions. On Soames's view, a speaker can use a sentence with a false semantic content to assert something true because of pragmatic enrichment. The example is

(4) The student I spoke to in my office this morning wants to go on to graduate school

(p. 165), said by Soames to inform a colleague who knows that Soames spoke to S in his office in the morning. The semantic content is a false proposition, since Soames in fact spoke to several students, but the enriched content that we get by adding and is identical with S to the descriptive condition of the semantic content, is true, and also picked up by the colleague, since both Soames and the colleague know that Soames is talking precisely about S.

The example needs to be changed just a little, however, for the account to run into trouble. Suppose instead that Soames and the colleague mutually know that Soames in the morning spoke to both S and R. In the afternoon conversation they are as before talking precisely about S, and Soames then utters (4), intending the same pragmatic enrichment as before. This time the likely reaction by the colleague is puzzlement. "Which one?" Why this reaction? Not because of the lack of salience of S, but rather because S is so salient that an anaphoric pronoun, like ‘he’, would have been more natural. Using the description instead creates a half-baked novelty effect. That this happens depends on our actual habits of production and comprehension. Soames may maintain that the asserted content is still true. If so, communication in this case failed. I think this matters to semantic and pragmatic theory. Whether or not we consider it rational for speakers to take actual interpretation processes into account, we get the wrong results if they are dismissed from theoretical consideration.

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