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ARE GENERAL TERMS RIGID?*

I

On Kripke's intended definition, a term designates an object \( x \) rigidly
if the term designates \( x \) with respect to every possible world in which
\( x \) exists and does not designate anything else with respect to worlds in
which \( x \) does not exist. Kripke evidently holds in *Naming and
Necessity*, hereafter *N&N* (pp. 117–144, *passim*, and especially at 134,
139–140), that certain general terms—including natural-kind terms
like “water” and “tiger”, phenomenon terms like “heat” and “hot”,
and color terms like “blue”—are rigid designators solely as a matter
of philosophical semantics (independently of empirical, extra-linguistic facts). As a consequence, Kripke argues, identity statements
involving these general terms are like identity statements involving
proper names (e.g., “Clark Kent = Superman”) in that, solely as a
matter of philosophical semantics, they express necessary truths if
they are true at all. But whereas it is reasonably clear what it is for a
(first-order) singular term to designate, Kripke does not explicitly say
what it is for a *general* term to designate. ¹

General terms are stan-

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* The present article was presented to the interdisciplinary Princeton Workshop
on Semantics in May 2003, where Robert May was commentator. I am grateful to
May and the other discussants for their reactions, especially Scott Soames. I am also
grateful to May for subsequent correspondence. I respond below to what I take to be
his central criticisms. The reader is hereby cautioned, however, that I do not know
the extent to which those criticisms represent his current thinking. Thanks go also to
Alan Berger, Delia Graff, and Teresa Robertson for discussion.

¹ The phrase “singular term” is used throughout as a meta-linguistic term for any
object-language expression of a certain logical type—specifically, any first-order
expression whose primary logico-semantic function is to designate (with respect to a
given context, time, place, and possible world, and under a given assignment of
values to variables) a single individual, and which attaches to (or fills an argument
place of) a first-order predicate to form a (open or closed) formula. A general term,
by contrast, is of a logical type that is potentially applicable (with respect to semantic
parameters) to any number of individuals.

dardly treated in modern logic as predicates, usually monadic predicates. There are very forceful reasons – due independently to Church and Gödel, and ultimately to Frege – for taking predicates to designate their semantic extensions. But insofar as the extension of the general term “tiger” is the class of actual tigers (or its characteristic function), it is clear that the term does not rigidly designate its extension, since the class of tigers in one possible world may differ from the class of tigers in another. What, then, is it for “tiger” to be rigid?

In his recent book, Beyond Rigidity (Oxford University Press, 2002), Scott Soames considers the two interpretive hypotheses that he deems the most promising, strongly favoring one of the two (pp. 249–263, 287–288, and passim). On the preferred interpretation, a general term is rigid, by definition, if it expresses a property (e.g., being a tiger) that is essential to anything that has it at all, i.e., a property of an object that the object could not fail to have (except perhaps by not existing). Soames characterizes this hypothesis as a “natural extension” to predicates of N&N’s definition of singular-term rigidity. I

Footnote 1. (Continued)

In the English sentence “Tony is a tiger”, “Tony” functions as a singular term, “tiger” as a general term. (See footnote 13 concerning the copula.) Proper names, personal pronouns, and individual variables are taken to be paradigm cases of singular terms, whereas common nouns, most adjectives (other than determiners), and intransitive verbs are taken to be paradigm cases of general terms. In the spirit of the literature on possible-world semantics and rigid-designator theory (dating back at least as far as John Stuart Mill), I assume for the most part that an English first-order definite description, dThe NP, is a singular term – ignoring the prospect that it is instead (in the rival spirit of Bertrand Russell and Richard Montague) a first-order uniqueness-restricted quantifier equivalent to [a unique NP].

2 Cf. my Reference and Essence (Princeton University Press and Basil Blackwell, 1981), at pp. 48–52. The metaphysical extension of a property P (in a possible world w at a time t) = def the class of possible objects that have P (in w at t). The semantic extension of a predicate (with respect to semantic parameters) = def the metaphysical extension of the property semantically expressed by P (with respect to those same parameters). The metaphysical intension of a property P = def the function that assigns to any possible world w (and time t) the metaphysical extension of P in w at t. The semantic intension of a predicate Π = def the metaphysical intension of the property semantically expressed by Π.

3 Cf. pp. 251–252. Soames defended this interpretive hypothesis at an international conference on Kripke’s work at the Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, October 1996, which Kripke and I both attended. The other interpretive hypothesis that Soames considers is mentioned below in footnote 11.
deem it a non-starter. One obvious problem with the proposal is that
color terms then emerge as non-rigid, contrary to Kripke's apparent
labeling of them as rigid. Also the definition does not provide any
obvious candidate to be the rigid designatum of a predicate like “is a
tiger”. The proposal might be based on a notion of poly-designation,
whereby a predicate “designates” one by one each of the things
individually to which the predicate correctly applies semantically, i.e.,
each of the elements of the semantic extension. A predicate for an
essential property applies to anything x that has the property in
question with respect to every world in which x exists, while a
predicate for an accidental property does not do this. But an essen-
tial-property predicate equally applies to the other things y in its
extension besides x, and does so with respect to worlds in which x does
not exist. This interpretation, therefore, does not fit the intended
definition of rigid designation.

If the predicate “is a tiger” is to be regarded as designating the
property of being a tiger (rather than as multiply designating each
individual tiger, and rather than as designating the class of actual
tigers), then it would appear that any predicate should be seen as
designating the property that it expresses. But in that case, every
predicate, even “is a bachelor”, emerges as a rigid designator, since
the attribute (property or relation) expressed by a predicate with
respect to a possible world does not vary from world to world.
Nothing special about natural-kind predicates, color predicates, etc.
has been identified to demarcate them from the rest. So it is that N&N
leaves us with the question: What is for a general term to be a rigid
designator?

One way to proceed that is more promising than the failed strat-
egies Soames considers would be to define a notion of designation
(simpliciter) for both singular and general terms in such a way that,
applying the intended definition of rigid designation as is, without

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4 Soames does not explicitly suggest this. On the contrary, he says repeatedly that a
natural-kind predicate designates a natural kind. It is difficult to reconcile this idea
with Kripke’s labeling of natural-kind terms as rigid designators, on Soames’s pro-
posed interpretation of the latter. (My best guess is that Soames attempts to provide
a reconstruction of the notion of rigidity for general terms that is divorced from the
notion of designation.) Cf. Monte Cooke, “If “Cat” is a Rigid Designator, What

5 Cf. Reference and Essence, pp. 44–54.
modification, a natural-kind general term (and a color general term, a 
natural-phenomenon general term, etc.) designates its designatum 
rigidly whereas some other sorts of general terms designate only non-
rigidly. What object, then, should a general term like “tiger” be said 
to designate? And which contrasting sorts of general terms designate 
only non-rigidly?

The first question has an obvious and natural response: The term 
“tiger” designates the species, *Tiger* (*Felis tigris*). In general, a bio-
logical taxonomic general term should be seen as designating a bio-
logical taxonomic kind (a species, a genus, an order, or etc.), a 
chemical-element general term (“gold”) should be seen as designating 
an element (gold), a chemical-compound general term as designating 
a compound (water), a color general term as designating a color (red), 
a natural-phenomenon general term as designating a natural phe-
nomenon (heat), and so on. The semantic content of a single-word 
general term might then be identified with the designated kind (or the 
designated substance, phenomenon, etc.). So far, so good. But now 
the threat is faced anew that every general term will emerge as a 
rigid designator of some appropriately related universal or other. 
If “bachelor” designates the gendered marital-status category, 
*Unmarried Man*, it does so rigidly. Even a common-noun phrase, like 
“adult male human who is not married”, emerges as a rigid design-

II

Such is the notion of designation for general terms that I proposed 
in *Reference and Essence* (pp. 52–54, 69–75), and which I continue 
to believe is fundamentally correct. Soames objects on the grounds

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6 Soames complains (p. 248) that Kripke’s original definition of rigidity is re-
stricted to singular terms. I see no conclusive evidence of this in Kripke’s writings. I 
assume instead that the notion of designation *simpliciter* that Kripke invokes extends 
to general terms (as does, for example, the notion of designation invoked in the work 
of Carnap). I believe Kripke intended his definition of rigidity to apply to general as 
well as singular terms. (It is possible that *N&N* uses the word “reference” for 
the special case of singular-term designation.)

7 See also Joseph Laporte, “Rigidity and Kind,” *Philosophical Studies*, 97, 3 
that “there is no point in defining a notion of rigidity for predicates
according to which all predicates turn out, trivially, to be rigid” (p.
251). Ultimately he decides that there is no notion of rigidity that
is simultaneously analogous to singular-term rigidity, a natural
extension of singular-term rigidity to general terms, and a notion on
which certain general terms (especially, natural-kind terms) are rigid
but many other general terms are non-rigid (p. 263). And this, he
argues, paves the way for a “demotion of the status of rigidity in
Kripke’s overall semantic picture” of terms singular and general (p.
264).

I sharply disagree. It is true that Kripke’s thesis that proper names
and certain general names alike, including natural-kind terms, are
rigid designators is secondary to a more fundamental thesis: that
these names are non-descriptional. However, the corollary that they
are therefore rigid is correct, and its philosophical significance should
not be missed or undervalued. Soames’s discussion suffers from a
failure to distinguish sharply between a general term like “tiger” and
its corresponding predicate, “is a tiger”. Even if every common count
noun (whether a single word or a phrase) emerges as a rigid design-
inator on my counter-proposal, it does not follow that every general
term is rigid. As Bernard Linsky noted in an unduly neglected paper,

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8 On Soames’s “Extended Millianism” (pp. 278–279), the content of a natural-kind phrase like “matter sample composed exclusively of molecules consisting of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom” is a property, whereas the content of a single-word natural-kind term like “water” is a natural kind (which Soames identifies with the metaphysical intension of a property). This account makes room for a distinction between descriptionality (connotativeness) and non-descriptionality for some general terms analogous to John Stuart Mill’s insights concerning definite descriptions and proper names, though only among natural-kind general terms and the like. (Mill, by contrast, classified all general terms as “connotative”.) Although Soames opposes extending this account to all general terms – presumably on the ground that doing so would render even an institutional-kind term like “bachelor” a rigid designator – there is no obvious principled reason why single-word non-natural-kind terms should differ from single-word natural-kind terms (and single-word color terms, single-word natural-phenomenon terms, etc.) in this respect. I suspect there is no such deviation. See footnotes 14 and 23.

some general terms, in fact, are manifestly non-rigid. This is most
evident with certain English definite descriptions. Definite descrip-
tions are typically singular terms – or alternatively (following the
great philosopher-lord), quantificational expressions that go around
impersonating singular terms – but some English definite descrip-
tions, unlike ordinary singular terms, function rather as if they were
adjectives or, more likely, mass-noun phrases. One example is the
description “the color of the sky”, as it occurs in the sentence

(P1) My true love’s eyes are the color of the sky.

Soames sees the definite description in the predicate of (P1) as a
singular term rather than a general term (p. 261). Yet the copula
“are” here cannot be the pluralization of the “is” of identity, since the
color blue is a single universal whereas the speaker’s lover’s eyes are
two particulars, and hence not both identical to a single thing. Nor
can the copula be the so-called “is” of constitution. One might argue
that the copula in (P1) is a fourth kind of “is”, over and above the
“is” of predication, the “is” of identity, and the “is” of constitution:
the dyadic “is” of possession. Soames is evidently committed to
posing such an alternative sense. This rather strained account raises
the question of why “to have” should come to masquerade as “to

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10 Bernard Linsky, “General Terms as Designators,” Pacific Philosophical Quar-
terly, 65 (1984), pp. 259–276. See also John Heintz, Subjects and Predicables (The
Hague: Mouton, 1973), at p. 88. Although my account differs significantly in certain
details from Linsky’s (cf. footnote 22 below), I have benefited from his observations.
In particular, as Linsky notes, it is highly likely that the notion of a general-term
definite description (a “definite ascription”) underlies Kripke’s labeling of certain
contrasting general terms as rigid designators. (See footnote 25 below concerning
Kripke’s reaction to this alternative to Soames’s preferred account.)

11 More accurately, he sees the description as a quantifier phrase, which he
“assimilates to the broader class of singular terms” (p. 316n17). Soames neither sees
the description in (P1) as a general term nor assimilates it to one.

I presented my objections to Soames’s proposed interpretation of N&N, as well as
this counter-proposal regarding designation, in the discussion following Soames’s
paper at the 1996 Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México conference on Kripke.
(See footnote 3 above.) There is some discussion in Soames that was evidently
prompted by my objections and counter-proposal, but in which he considers instead
a significantly different proposal (one which I reject), according to which a general
term (“predicate”) is to be labeled rigid, or non-rigid, according as some relevantly
associated singular term is rigid or not (pp. 364n9, 260–262, 289–292, 307–311).
Soames objects that on the counter-proposal he considers, every general term
(“predicate”) is rigid. This contradicts the very point of (P1), as it is intended.
(Soames does not consider the prospect that the description “the color of the sky”
functions as a general term rather than a singular term.)
be”. It is considerably more plausible that the “are” in (P1) is the very same copula that occurs in

\[ (C) \quad \text{My true love’s eyes are blue} \]

\textit{to wit}, our old and dear friend, the “is” of predication (in its pluralized conjugation). This common form of “be” cannot coherently combine with an English expression functioning as a (first-order) singular term to form a meaningful English predicate. Any English term (or English expression that functions as a term when occurring in a predicate) that combines with the “is” of predication to form a monadic predicate, must function as a general term in the predicate so formed.\(^{12}\) (I take these principles to be partly “criterial” of the distinction between singular and general terms.) Just as the adjective “blue” is a general term in (C), so the definite description “the color of the sky” is a general term in (P1). The former rigidly designates the color blue; the latter designates the color non-rigidly.

How can a definite description combine with the “is” of predication while designating something? In the same way as the adjective “blue” or the mass noun “water”. Let us formally represent the copula in “is blue” as a predicate-forming operator on adjectives (whether single words or adjective phrases) and mass nouns, “\(i\)\{\}”, and let us represent the “is a” in “is a tiger” as a similar predicate-forming operator on count nouns, “\(is-a\)\{\}”, so that the predicate “is blue” is formalized as “\(is\)\{blue\}” and the predicate “is an albino tiger” as “\(is-a\)\{albino tiger\}”.\(^{13}\) The term “the color of the

\(^{12}\) See footnote 1. Numerous linguists and philosophers have argued that a first-order definite description following the verb “be” is at least often a general term (or “predicate”), and the copula the “is” of predication rather than the “is” of identity. See, for example, George Wilson, “On Definite and Indefinite Descriptions,” \textit{The Philosophical Review}, 87 (1978), pp. 48–76; and Delia Graff, “Descriptions as Predicates,” \textit{Philosophical Studies}, 102, 1 (January 2001), pp. 1–42. If a first-order definite description can combine with the “is” of predication to form a monadic predicate, then the description must function predicatively in the predicate so formed rather than as a singular term.

\(^{13}\) In light of the previous note, it might be advisable to introduce also a third predicate-forming operator, “\(i\)-the\{\}”, whereby “\(i\)-the\{author of \textit{Waverley}\}” is equivalent to “\(i\)-a\{unique author of \textit{Waverley}\}”. I remain neutral here concerning whether the copula in “Tony is a tiger” is the “is” of predication or the “is” of identity (“is identical with some tiger”). If it is the latter, the predicate-forming operator “\(i\)-a” may have a complex definition invoking existential quantification and identity. Some device may still be needed, however, to convert the count noun into a predicate, as for example in:
sky” may then be formally rendered as a second-order definite
description:

\[(\lambda F)(is-a^2\{color\}(F) \& is\{F\}(the \ sky)),\]

where “F” is a variable ranging over appropriate universals. (The
superscript “2” indicates that the resulting predicate is second-order.)
As a second-order term, the description designates even while com-
bining felicitously with the “is” of predication.\(^\dagger\) Indeed, so under-
stood, (C) is a straightforward logical consequence of (P1) taken
together with the empirical premise,

\[(P2) \quad Blue \ is \ the \ color \ of \ the \ sky.\]

This inference is best seen as a special instance of Leibniz’s Law, or
Substitution of Equality. In the words of a great English poet, it’s
easy if you try. According to (P2), the color blue is identical with the
color of the sky. Since the speaker’s true love’s eyes are the color of
the sky, it follows by Substitution that those same eyes are blue. All
you need (besides love) is to see the copula in (P2) for what it surely
is: an “is” of identity, attached to general terms instead of singular
terms, and forming a sentence that is true if and only if the terms
flanking the “is” are co-designative.

Formalization of the inference might help to make the point:

Footnote 13. (Continued)

\[(\lambda F)(\lambda x)(\exists \ y)(F\text{-}izes(y) \ & \ x = y)]\]

where the “-izes” operator applies to a count noun to yield a predicate (see footnote
22). Since an analysis of indefinite descriptions combined with “be” to form a mo-
nadic predicate does not eliminate the need for converting a count noun into a
predicate, it may be more plausible to see the indefinite article in such constructions
as syncategorematic – a purely cosmetic grammatical convenience (or inconve-
nience!) – rather than as signaling its alternative function as an existential-quantifi-
cational operator.

\(^\dagger\) Using this formal device one may even form non-rigid count-noun general
terms, e.g.

\[(\lambda F)(is-a^2\{\text{gendered marital-status category}\}(F) \ & \ is-a\{F\}(Hugh \ Hefner)).\]

This application of the device to count nouns does not obviously correspond to any
legitimate construction of English, but neither is there any obvious reason why such
a construction could not be appended to English. (Sentences like (P1) might be taken
as evidence that English already has some characteristics of a second-order formal
language.)
(P1') \( (x)[is-ag\{\text{eye of my true love}\}](x) \rightarrow is\{(iF)[is-ag^2\{\text{colour}\}(F) \& \text{is}\{F\}(\text{the sky})]\}(x) \)

(P2') \( \text{blue} = i^2(iF)[is-ag^2\{\text{colour}\}(F) \& \text{is}\{F\}(\text{the sky})] \)

\[ \therefore (C') \quad (x)[is-ag\{\text{eye of my true love}\}(x) \rightarrow \text{is\{blue\}(x)} \]

(Then again, it might not.) The copula in (P2) is evidently the same

“is” of identity that occurs in the conclusion of “There are exactly

three volumes of Russell and Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica*;

therefore, three is the number of volumes of *Principia Mathematica*."

Soames contends instead (pp. 364\#9, 289–290) that the syllable/

toxic “blue” represents a pair of English homonyms: one an

adjective (blue\(_1\)), the other a noun (blue\(_2\)) that is parasitic on the

adjective. This perspective yields a markedly different rendering of

the inference:

(P1'\(\prime\)) \( (x)[x \text{ is an eye of my true love}] \rightarrow Is(x, (y)[y \text{ is a color} \& Is(\text{the sky}, y)])] \)

(P2'\(\prime\)) \( \text{blue}_1 = (y)[y \text{ is a color} \& Is(\text{the sky}, y)] \)

\[ \therefore (C'\prime) \quad (x)[x \text{ is an eye of my true love} \rightarrow x \text{ is blue}_1, \]

where the dyadic predicate “Is” occurring in the premises represents

the alleged “is” of possession. This argument, however, is invalid as

it stands. The argument (and also the parallel invalid argument ob-
tained by interchanging the major premise and conclusion) may be

validated by supplementing the premises with a striking Carnapian

“meaning postulate” (perhaps as a tacit premise): “Something is blue

if it is blue”, taken in the alleged sense of:

(P3) \( \text{Something is}_{\text{predication}} \text{ blue}_1 \text{ iff it is}_{\text{possession}} \text{ blue}_2, \)

and formalized as

(P3'\(\prime\)) \( (x)[x \text{ is blue}_1 \leftrightarrow Is(x, \text{blue}_2)]. \)

But how plausible is it that both of the words “is” and “blue” making

up the English predicate are ambiguous (quite independently of a

third meaning, the “is” of identity), and in such a way that, solely as a

matter of English semantics, the predicate applies under one meaning

exactly when it applies under the other as well? Indeed, solely as a

matter of English semantics, the two alleged readings would have to

be *logically equivalent* – sharing not only the same semantic extension,

and not only the same modal intension, but even the very same
logical content, i.e., the same function from models to intensions.\textsuperscript{15} This degree of duplication – duplication of spelling, phonetics, structure, etc., and in addition, duplication of logical content – strongly suggests that something has gone wrong in the analysis. Rather than exposing an unnoticed convergence, our distinction without a difference more likely indicates an erroneous proliferation ("is\textsuperscript{predication} blue\textsubscript{1}" vs. "is\textsuperscript{possession} blue\textsubscript{2}"). The fact that the word "blue" can occur alternatively as a noun or as an adjective does not imply that the word is ambiguous with regard to semantic extension or intension, let alone that there are two words "blue" rather than one – let alone that there is in addition to the standard "is" of predication another predicative "is", the alleged "is" of possession. To quote Kripke (slightly out of context): "It is very much the lazy man's approach to philosophy to posit ambiguities when in trouble. ... [The] ease of the move should counsel a policy of caution: Do not posit an ambiguity ... unless there are really compelling theoretical or intuitive grounds to suppose that an ambiguity really is present" ("Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", p. 19).

III

Robert May has argued in response to these considerations that insofar as "the color of the sky" is to be classified either as a singular term or as a general term, it is a singular term even in (P1).\textsuperscript{16} He endorses this conclusion on the ground that definite descriptions are nominal phrases that can occur in positions occupied by singular terms – as, for example, in "Max and the color of the sky are two of my favorite things". In addition, May cites the particular sentences, 

\textsuperscript{15} See my "On Content", \textit{Mind}, 101, 404 (October 1992), pp. 733–751, concerning the relevant notion of logical content. As I use the term, the \textit{logical content} of an expression $e$ is the function that assigns to any model $Z$ for the language, the principal semantic value (classically the extension, in modal logic the intension) of $e$ in $Z$. Meaningful expressions are logically equivalent when, and only when, they have the same logical content. For example, "$\left( p \lor q \right) \land \neg \left( p \land q \right)$" and "$\neg \left( p \equiv q \right)$" have the same logical content – since they have the same truth table – even if they do not have the same semantic content \textit{simpliciter} (i.e., even if they express different propositions).

\textsuperscript{16} "Comments on Nathan Salmon, 'Are General Terms Rigid?'," presented to the 2003 Princeton Workshop on Semantics.
“Max is the man for the job” (due to James Higgenbotham) and the sarcastically understated “Max isn’t the best cook in town”, as further examples – allegedly like (P1) – of the “is” of predication combined with an English singular term rather than a general term to form an English monadic predicate.

As a rejoinder to May’s objections, and in order to clarify the position I am defending, I offer the following observations:

(i) The possibility of grammatically occupying singular-term position is a necessary condition on singular terms, not a sufficient condition. Mass terms in English, for example, can occur in singular-term position (“Water is H2O”, “Max and gin are two of my favorite things”), but they also occur in general-term position, combining with the “is” of predication to form English monadic predicates (“The liquid in this cup is water”). Likewise, canonical color terms and number terms (“three”) can occur in singular-term position (as in (P2) and “Nine is the number of planets”), but they also combine with predicational “be” to form a predicate (as in (C) and “The planets are nine”)17 Contrary to May, the latter is something singular terms cannot do, at least not while functioning as singular terms, or even as first-order restricted quantifiers in the manner of Russell and Montague. (See footnote 1 above. The fact that mass terms and the like can occur grammatically in singular-term position in addition to general-term position might be taken as independent grounds for recognizing at least some general terms as second-order singular terms.)

(ii) English also includes sentences like “What I am is nauseous”, in which the subject is a general term – or, at least, would appear to be one. Indeed, this sentence appears to be an identity statement, and its subject a second-order definite description (or, alternatively, a second-order restricted quantifier). Insofar as English includes second-order definite descriptions, phrases like “the color of the sky”, “Henry’s favorite beverage”, and “the chemical compound composed

17 The predicate formed by combining “be” with a canonical number term might be regarded as multi-adic (rather than as monadic, or dyadic, etc.). More accurately, such numerical predicates should be seen as applying collectively rather than individually (or equivalently, as applying to pluralities or multiplicities, i.e., to groups having a number which may be other than one). See my “Wholes, Parts, and Numbers,” in J. Tomberlin, ed., Philosophical Perspectives 11: Mind, Causation, and World (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1997), pp. 1–15.
of two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen” are as good candidates as
any. Although these descriptions can occur in singular-term posi-
tion, they also combine with the “is” of predication to form monadic
predicates, wherein they cannot function as singular terms. In fact, at
least some of these same definite descriptions appear to function as
mass-noun phrases and/or as color-term noun phrases. (Consider
(P2’) and “Water is the chemical compound composed of two parts
hydrogen, one part oxygen”.) As such, these descriptions would be
general terms rather than singular.

(iii) The copula in May’s examples – “Max is the man for the job”
and “Max isn’t the best cook in town” – is normally and plausibly
construed as the “is” of identity rather than the “is” of predication.
For example, “Max is the man for the job” is logically equivalent to
its converse, “The man for the job is Max”, and also to Russellian
paraphrases of its identity construal – “Someone is both a unique
man for the job and Max”, “Max, and no one else, is a man for the
job”, etc. Likewise, “Max is the man for the job” supports Leibniz’s-
Law substitution, e.g., “Therefore, Max speaks Japanese iff the man
for the job speaks Japanese”. By contrast, (P1), on its relevant
reading, is not equivalent to “Something is both a unique color of
the sky and each of my true love’s eyes”. Neither does (P1) support
logical substitution (e.g., “Therefore, my true love’s eyes have cat-
aracts iff the color of the sky has cataracts”). Since the copula in (P1),
on its relevant reading, cannot be read as the “is” of identity, and
should be read instead as the “is” of predication, the definite
description does not function in (P1) as a singular term.

(iv) May’s claim that some first-order definite descriptions, like
“the man for the job”, can combine with the “is” of predication to
form an English monadic predicate, rather than with the “is” of

18 The threat of Russell’s Paradox applies pressure to see some definite descriptions as differing from others in logical form, despite sharing the same syntactic form. The kinds that come readily to mind are always of the following sort (R): a kind K that is not itself something of kind K. The species, Tiger, for example, is not itself a tiger. (Indeed, precious few kinds are not of this kind (R)). Consider now the very kind just specified: the kind (R) such that, necessarily, something is of (R) iff it is a kind K that is not itself something of kind K. The preceding definite description, despite its syntax, cannot be first-order on pain of contradiction (assuming that it designates a kind, and assuming obvious logical properties of definite descriptions).

19 The converse of (P1), “The color of the sky are my true love’s eyes”, is acceptable only in stylized discourse, wherein it is a stylistic variant of the original (and the copula functions as the converse of the “is” of predication).
identity, is controversial. (See footnotes 12 and 13 above.) If the
thesis is correct, the description in the predicate so formed is equiv-
alent to a predicative indefinite description – as perhaps the indefinite
description in “is a unique man for the job”. A predicative indefinite
description (e.g., the phrase “a tiger” in the predicate “is a tiger”) is
not a singular term, and does not function as one in its containing
predicate. May’s examples therefore cannot be instances of a mo-
nadic predicate formed by combining the “is” of predication (func-
tioning as such in the predicate) with a singular term (functioning as
such in the predicate).20

(v) That “blue” and “the color of the sky” are general terms is a
fact about logical form. It is not a fact about syntactic form – or
about grammar in a syntactic sense of the term (which does not
conform to current usage in theoretical linguistics). The following
sentences, on their standard readings, have the same syntactic form.

(1) Henry’s favorite shirt is the color of the sky
(2) Henry’s favorite color is the color of the sky

Each is a copular sentence constructed from a definite description of
the form [Henry’s favorite N] as subject, the appropriate conjugation

20 May contends that the definite description in “Henry is the best man for the
job” may be seen as functioning simultaneously as a first-order singular term and
predicatively. He argues that this dual function is illustrated by the definite
description in “Oscar considers Henry the best man for the job”. This sentence
provides no clear support for the claimed schizophrenia. On the contrary, the
description cannot function in the latter sentence as a customary-mode singular term.
If it did, it would support Leibniz’s-Law substitution, but it does not. (If Oscar
judges Henry the best man for the job, while the best man for the job is in fact the
man who is having an illicit affair with Oscar’s wife, it does not follow that Oscar
considers Henry the man who is having an illicit affair with Oscar’s wife.) Neither
does the description in “Oscar considers Henry the best man for the job” function
straightforwardly predicatively – e.g., in the manner of the indefinite description in
the predicate “is a unique best man for the job”. For, again, if the description
functioned in the manner of a customary-mode, predicative, uniqueness-restricted,
indefinite description, it would support logical substitution. Rather the description
occurs in a non-extensional context of cognitive attitude; its function in “Oscar
considers Henry the best man for the job” is the same as in “Oscar thinks that Henry
is the best man for the job”. As Frege has taught us, the description here is not a
singular term designating its customary designatum. Rather it is in ungerade (ob-
lique, indirect) mode, designating its ungerade designatum, which is its customary
content. Moreover, as Frege also noted, the customary content is (in some sense)
objectual rather than function-like, so that the description also does not function
predicatively. In sharp contrast, the description in (P1) is in customary mode,
wherein it designates its customary designatum, the color blue.
of the verb “be” as copula, and the definite description “the color of
the sky” as predicate nominal. Nevertheless, they differ sharply in
logical form. Sentence (1) is a monadic predication, whereas sentence
(2) is (equivalent to) an identity/equation, on a par with (P2) and with
May’s examples (e.g., “Max is the man for the job”). Correspond-
ingly, (2) is logically equivalent to its converse and supports Leib-
niz’s-Law substitution; (1) is not and does not.

It would be a mistake to infer that, since they differ in logical form,
(1) and (2) also differ in syntactic/grammatical form. Compare the
following two sentences, on their standard readings.

(3) Henry’s favorite shirt is blue
(4) Henry’s favorite color is blue,

These sentences are semantically related exactly as (1) and (2). All
four sentences, (1)–(4), share a common syntactic structure. Like the
pair (1) and (2), (3) and (4) differ in the replacement in their subjects
of “shirt” by “color” (count nouns both), and are otherwise struc-
aturally identical. Here the lexical switch in the subject issues a cate-
gorial (non-structural) switch in the predicate. The word “blue”
occurs as an adjective in (3), as a noun in (4), reflecting the change in
logical form. This grammatical switch in the predicate does not occur
with (1) and (2). As already noted, abstracting from their meanings
and their logic – which are indeed very different – (1) and (2) share the
same syntactic analysis in terms of both constituent structure and
lexical and phrasal categories. Yet the same change in logical form
that occurs in (3) and (4) also occurs in (1) and (2), where it is
concealed behind a veil of superficial syntactic similarity. Though
“the color of the sky” is a nominal phrase, it plays exactly the same
logico-semantic role in (1) and (P1) that the adjectival “blue” plays in
(3) and (C) – a role reflected in the grammar of the word but not in
that of the description.21

Here again, contrary to May, recognition that the copula in (P1),
on its standard reading, is the same “is” of predication that occurs in
(3) and (C) reveals that the predicate nominal in (P1) – regardless of

21 The original version of the present paper, to which May replied, used the word
“adjectival”, inadvisably, in a logico-semantic (and consequently artificially broad)
sense, to include any term whose logical form allows it to combine with the “is” of
predication, without an intervening article, to form a monadic predicate (one that is
not logically equivalent to the result of combining instead with the “is” of identity).
its syntax – is a general term, since a term that combines with the “is” of predication (without an intervening article) to form a monadic predicate cannot function as a singular term in the predicate so formed.

(vi) Having misclassified “the color of the sky” as a (first-order) singular term, May is prepared to classify the copula in (1) and (P1) as an expression that sometimes operates on a singular term to form a monadic predicate. The predicate-forming operator “is { }” in (P1’) and (C’) is not an operator of this sort. On the other hand, the envisioned “is” of possession in (P1") is exactly that. And indeed, May defends the second analysis of the argument about my true love’s eyes. May’s stance thus fails to appreciate the implausibility of its commitments, e.g., that each of the words making up the English predicate “is blue” has two separate readings (independently of a third meaning – the “is” of identity), but only in such a way that, solely as a matter of English semantics, the two resulting readings of the predicate are logically equivalent.

Given that the noun/adjective “blue” designates the color blue, that the definite description “the color of the sky” designates the

Footnote 21. (Continued) If I am correct, this class includes at least mass terms and some second-order definite descriptions, which are nominals rather than adjectival. Some of May’s original criticisms were directed at showing that the central example, “the color of the sky”, is grammatically not an adjective phrase but uniformly a noun phrase. This observation, though correct, is irrelevant to my argument.

It is at least likely that each of (1)–(4) has a non-standard, surrealistic reading on which it has the same logical form that its pair-mate has on its standard reading. Thus (1) might be read as expressing that a certain particular (a shirt) and a certain universal (a color) are one and the very same thing; (2) might be read as expressing the alternative category mistake that a certain universal is colored. (Some deny that (1)–(4) have these alternative readings. But the very fact that one can routinely dismiss such readings as category mistakes seems to indicate that we have some understanding of the sentence on the purported alternative reading. Mere gibberish does not express a category mistake or anything else.) Insofar as each of the sentences has an alternative, surrealistic reading in addition to its standard reading, the ambiguity of (3) is grammatically signaled by a toggle between adjectival and nominal “blue”. Similarly for (4). There is no such toggle accompanying the ambiguity in (1), nor that in (2). The point of the contrast between (1) and (2) is not that they cannot be read as having the same logical form. It is, rather, that whatever logical form, or forms, (1) may have is a matter of its semantics, not its syntax, and similarly for (2). The syntactic form of (1) and (2) is the same, and constant, throughout.
color of the sky, and the empirical fact that the sky is blue, the general
terms “blue” and “the color of the sky” are co-designative.\(^{22}\) (No
surprises here.) But whereas the former is surely rigid, the latter
designates red with respect to some worlds, making (P2) contingent.
(Again, no surprise.) If the copula in (P2) is indeed an “is” of identity
to be placed between general terms, then Kripke’s claim is vindicated
that identity statements in which rigid general terms occur are, unlike
(P2) but like identity statements involving proper names, necessary if
true at all. Examples are close at hand: “Furze is gorse”; “Gold is
Au”; “Water is H\(_2\)O”. As already noted, even some descriptional
general terms, like “adult male human who is not married”, are rigid
designators. Still, non-rigid general terms are everywhere. These in-
clude such definite descriptions as “the species that serves as mascot
for Princeton University”, “the liquid compound that covers most of

\(^{22}\) Though the general-term description “the color of the sky” designates blue, the
corresponding predicate “is the color of the sky” semantically expresses the property
of having the same color as the sky, as opposed to the more specific property of being
blue (in color). The two properties share the same metaphysical extension – to wit,
the class of all blue things – but they differ in metaphysical extension in some
counter-factual worlds, and so differ in metaphysical intension. It is important to
notice also that whereas “the color of the sky” is a non-rigid general term, the gerund
phrase “being the color of the sky” evidently designates a particular property
– that of having the same color as the sky.

In “Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice” David Kaplan says, “almost all single
words other than particles seem to me to be rigid designators” (p. 518n31). He once
suggested to me (in conversation) that whereas the common noun “tiger” rigidly
designates the species, the corresponding predicate “is a tiger” rigidly designates the
property of being a tiger. Cf. his “Afterthoughts” to “Demonstratives,” in Themes
from Kaplan, at pp. 580–581n30. On this view, whereas “the color of the sky” may be
a non-rigid general term, its corresponding predicate “is the color of the sky” is rigid
– all the more reason to distinguish sharply between a general term and its corre-
spending predicate. Linsky holds, by contrast, that “is the color of the sky” (non-
rigidly) designates the property of being blue, rather than (rigidly) designating the
property of having the same color as the sky (op. cit., p. 270). I prefer to regard the
predicate “is the color of the sky” as designating its extension (non-rigidly, of course)
while expressing the property of having the same color as the sky, as the predicate’s
semantic content. On this view the copula/operators formalized above may be taken
as designating (with respect to a possible world and time) the function that assigns to
any universal its metaphysical extension (in that world at that time) – making
each copula/operator roughly analogous to the functor “the metaphysical extension
of”.

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22 Though the general-term description “the color of the sky” designates blue, the
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blue (in color). The two properties share the same metaphysical extension – to wit,
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notice also that whereas “the color of the sky” is a non-rigid general term, the gerund
phrase “being the color of the sky” evidently designates a particular property
– that of having the same color as the sky.
the Earth”, “the most valuable of elemental metals”, “the color of the sky” and so on.23

It was once maintained by many that a general term like “blue” is synonymous with a description like “the color of the sky”, that “water” is synonymous with a description, such as perhaps “the colorless, odorless, potable, thirst-quenching liquid that fills oceans, lakes, and streams”, and that “pain” is synonymous with a description of the form “the physiological state that occupies such-and-such causal/functional role.” Some consequences of these views are that “The sky is blue” and “The oceans are filled with water” express necessary, a priori truths, whereas “Water is the chemical compound of two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen” and “Pain is the stimulation of C-fibers” expresses contingent identities. Today we know better – many of us anyway – thanks in large measure to N&N’s lasting insight that “blue”, “water”, and the allegedly synonymous general-term descriptions are not, rigid designators in the original sense of that term.24 The relevant notion of general-term rigidity results directly from recognizing expressions like “blue”, “water”, “the color of the sky” and “the liquid that sustains terrestrial life” as general terms designating appropriate universals.

23 Some definite descriptions are rigid, e.g., “the even prime integer”. In N&N, Kripke calls such descriptions rigid de facto, in contrast to proper names, which are termed rigid de jure (p. 21n). There is a question whether the rigidity of “bachelor” is de jure or de facto. (Cf. footnote 8 above.) The word “tiger” is presumably rigid de jure, something like a logically proper name of the species. By contrast, the general-term description “the gendered marital-status category K such that necessarily, someone is of K iff he is an adult & he is male & he is human & he is unmarried” is rigid de facto. Perhaps an English common noun phrase (sans article/determiner) is typically synonymous with a general-term description of the particular form: the Φ-kind/category K such that necessarily, something is of K iff it is such-and-such & it is thus-and-so & ... This would explain exactly how common noun phrases – and hence also single words that are definably synonymous with such phrases (if such there be) – are descriptional, while simultaneously explaining why they are nevertheless uniformly rigid. A modification of this form would be required for noun phrases employing adjectives like “suspected”, “alleged”, etc. (Cf. footnote 14 above.) The word “bachelor” seems to me, on the other hand, rather like a logically proper name, rather than a description, of the gendered marital-status category, Unmarried Man. If that is how it does function, then its rigidity is de jure and, contrary to the common view, it is not strictly synonymous with the corresponding description, even though it is closely tied to the description – as the name “Hesperus” is closely tied to some description of the form “the first heavenly body visible at dusk from location l at time t.”

(colors, substances, etc.), and then applying Kripke's definition of rigidity without modification – with the result that some general terms are rigid, some not. This notion is analogous to singular-term rigidity in every way that matters.\textsuperscript{25}

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\textsuperscript{25} Responding to my comments during the discussion of Soames's presentation at the 1996 Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México conference (see footnotes 3, 11), Kripke said that this proposed interpretation of N&N on general-term rigidity is basically correct. Soames reports that in November 1997, when he presented what is essentially the same interpretation proposed in the book with Kripke in attendance, Kripke this time expressed sympathy with Soames's assessment that there is no notion of rigidity for general terms relevantly analogous to singular-term rigidity (p. 366\#22). I am puzzled by the apparent inconsistency between Kripke's response in Mexico City and his reported response only 1 year later. My confidence is unshaken, however, that the counter-proposal correctly indicates an extremely close analogy between singular and general terms, and with it a general notion of rigidity applicable to some (but not all) terms of either sort.