

**What is Meaning?** By Scott Soames. Soochow University Lectures in Philosophy (Princeton, NJ:

Princeton University Press, 2010), x + 132 pp. \$29.95 / £20.95 cloth.

Sergeiy Sandler ([sergeiys@gmail.com](mailto:sergeiys@gmail.com))

This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form has been published in the journal *The European*

*Legacy* © 2012 copyright Taylor & Francis (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10848770.2012.699329>);

*The European Legacy* is available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>.

Scott Soames' new book, *What is Meaning*, is an important book, both in the issues it raises and in its shortcomings. It is the first serious discussion of meaning (not "semantic content" or some other term of art designed to sidestep the real issue) by a leading analytic philosopher of language in a long while, and its findings lead towards a more realistic understanding of meaning and language.

Traditionally, the meaning of sentences has been identified with the logical notion of the proposition, the bearer of truth or falsity, relating "agents – those who assert, believe, or know something – to that which they assert, believe, or know" (2). However, as Soames notes, nothing about a proposition, its components, its structure, or the structure and truth conditions of the sentence expressing it, is intrinsically meaningful. There is nothing there "which, *by its very nature*, indicates that anything is predicated of anything" (31). After reviewing and rejecting attempts, from Gottlob Frege to Donald Davidson and beyond, to formulate and grapple with this problem, Soames comes up with his own solution: predication is an act of cognition and bears meaning as such. In the simplest case, "When we see an object *as red*, we predicate redness of it" (81). The proposition is merely a formal means of expressing this meaning. Propositions are thus types of cognition events.

This attempt to ground meaning in a realistic cognitive framework is indeed a positive contribution to the philosophy of language, which has recently trended toward a view of semantics as a pure manipulation of abstract formulae. Soames explains the abstract (proposition) by the actual (cognitive events), rather than the other way around. But, crucially, his choice of predication as the centerpiece of his account undermines this very achievement.

The problem with Soames' account can be termed "the problem of the unity of predication": it

cannot be taken for granted that predication is the same thing when it takes place in the mind, in language, and in the world. This is an especially serious problem because of the difference between the first-person, second-person, and third-person perspectives. I have ample experience of predication (in Soames' sense) going on in my own mind, but no experience whatsoever of such predication in anybody else's mind. And yet, on Soames' account, propositions as *supra-individual types* should exist for linguistic expressions to bear meaning.

The notion of predication, originating in Aristotelian logic, does not easily fit our understanding of either mind, language, or world. Aristotle himself grounded this notion in his metaphysics of forms, which is no longer seriously entertained by philosophers. Soames' account commits him to the metaphysical assumption that the world is made of objects and properties, which is far from self-obvious.

In the mind, Soames' notion of predication encounters many potential problems. Seeing an object as red means predicating redness of an object *non-linguistically*. This sounds simple enough, but is not altogether clear: do I have to expressly notice that it is red? And what about negations? Seeing something as red forms the proposition that X is red; does it also automatically therefore form the propositions that it is not blue, not green, not beige, not grayish-pink, etc. *ad infinitum*? And can less tangible properties also be predicated non-linguistically?

In language, predication is also a problematic notion. First, many times linguistic expressions have to be rephrased (put in the "correct" logical form) for overt predication to appear in them. And then again, there are different kinds of overt linguistic predication too: "a red apple" is not the same linguistic structure as "This apple is red". Above all, what linguistic expressions mean to people using them, is better expressible in terms of action than of predication.

Which brings me to the final problem with the book's conception of meaning. While Soames claims to ground his notion of meaning in a realistic account of human cognition, he makes no use of the ample scientific knowledge that has accumulated about human cognition, and he seems utterly unaware of the truly revolutionary effect that a cognitive orientation has had on linguistic theory in the last several decades. Today's cognitive linguistics radically re-conceives syntactic structure,

leaving behind the traditional notions of subject and predicate in favor of more flexible ones, such as constructions and formal idioms (a good overview, for those unfamiliar with the relevant literature, can be found in: William Croft and D. Allan Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press, 2004). Soames' work is simply irrelevant to the issues it raises.

The philosophical "armchair method" still has much to offer scientific inquiry by suggesting theoretical integrations of empirical findings, by questioning assumptions behind empirical work, by evaluating it, but surely not by ignoring it.