



# Propositions as semantic pretense

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## Abstract

Our linguistic and inferential practices are said to implicate a kind of abstract object playing various roles traditionally attributed to propositions, and our predictive and explanatory success with this “proposition-talk” is held to underwrite a realistic interpretation of it. However, these very same practices pull us in different directions regarding the nature of propositions, frustrating the development of an adequate unified theory of them. I explain how one could retain proposition-talk, and the advantages of interpreting it as being purportedly about propositions, even if problems about the identity conditions for propositions motivated a Quinean rejection of them. The non-error-theoretic solution is to understand proposition-talk in terms of *semantic pretense*. On this approach, talking as if there were propositions lets us put readily available logical and linguistic devices to new expressive purposes, providing a way to make indirectly certain complicated, genuinely true assertions we cannot make directly. Proposition-talk thus extends the expressive capacity of a language in a logico-syntactically conservative way.

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## 1. Introduction

In analytic philosophy of language and mind, the traditional notion of a proposition is back in vogue. This really is no surprise, since there is considerable theoretical advantage in the idea of a single kind of entity playing the wide range of roles associated with propositions. Such entities would be the sharable objects of belief and other intentional attitudes, the contents of these thought-states and of assertions and other speech acts, and the common meanings of utterances from different languages (or, perhaps more precisely, what their meanings map the utterances onto). With such a variety of functions associated with it, the notion of a proposition simplifies, unifies, and systematizes theorizing about

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our talk and thought. These benefits have pushed many contemporary philosophers past nominalistic fears of what W.V.O. Quine once disparaged as ‘creatures of darkness’ over to realism about propositions.

But although the supposed abstract nature of propositions raises few eyebrows these days (perhaps too few), propositions face another problem underwriting Quine’s injunction against them. The very linguistic and inferential practices that supposedly support postulating propositions (henceforth, *proposition-talk*<sup>1</sup>) form such a motley collection that a unified account of these putative entities appears unattainable. This threatens to undercut the advantages that a realistic interpretation of proposition-talk would offer. My aim here is to introduce an account of this talk that retains these advantages even if the threat of indeterminacy prevented us from taking propositions seriously.

The central thesis of my account is that proposition-talk is a kind of fictional discourse. Propositions may not exist, but talking *as if* they do extends the expressive capacity of our language in useful and important ways. The appeal to fiction makes it possible to unify the miscellany of practices that has frustrated attempts to apply a single account of propositions across all of the talk’s contexts. Further, while my account rejects any serious ontological commitment to propositions, it does not swing to the other extreme of taking proposition-talk to be literally about something other than propositions (e.g., sentences) (Quine, 1960, Ch. 6) and thus avoids the problems that approach generates (Church, 1950; Schiffer, 1987, Ch. 5).<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, my account vindicates proposition-talk and retains its benefits by explaining it as an indirect, yet particularly effective means of making claims about certain complex features of linguistic and mental items, and of expressing certain general claims about these features that we could not otherwise express.

## 2. Propositions and their problems

It will be useful to review both the motivations for postulating propositions and the difficulties the notion generates. Beginning with the case for propositions, certain of our linguistic and inferential practices implicate, at least *prima facie*, a kind of mind- and language-independent, abstract object fulfilling the various theoretical roles traditionally associated with these putative entities. Consider the following examples:

Corey believes that crabapples are edible.  
So, there is something Corey believes.

Corey asserted that crabapples are edible.  
Isabel believes that crabapples are edible.  
So, Isabel believes something Corey asserted.

‘Holzäpfel sind eßbar’ means that crabapples are edible.  
‘Crabapples are edible’ means that crabapples are edible.  
So, ‘Holzäpfel sind eßbar’ and ‘Crabapples are edible’ mean the same thing

<sup>1</sup> This expression is not meant to imply any actual ontological commitment to propositions, but only to recognize that we at least talk *as if* there were such entities. On my view, of course, this is also *all* we do.

<sup>2</sup> Davidson, 1968 presents a view in which the embedded sentence is used rather than (or perhaps as well as) mentioned, but Loar, 1976, pp. 147–148 argues that, ultimately, this approach still requires an appeal to propositions to work adequately. See Rumfitt, 1993 on this point as well.

All of these claims are perfectly in order, and these inferences are all intuitively valid. The existential quantification involved in these examples seems to show that (at least sometimes) ‘that’-clauses function as singular terms purporting to denote entities playing the roles identified above as those traditionally attributed to propositions (Quine, 1960, p. 192; Fodor, 1978, pp. 178–187; Schiffer, 1996, 2000).<sup>3</sup> This conclusion applies equally to expressions that function in identity statements with ‘that’-clauses, e.g., ‘what Corey said’, ‘Granny’s theory’, and ‘Goldbach’s Conjecture’. Moreover, in addition to accommodating our quantificational practices, the notion of a proposition simplifies and systematizes our reasoning about what people assert, believe, etc. by regimenting into first-order logic the sorts of entailment relations displayed in the following, intuitively valid inference (Yablo, 2000).

Dex believes everything Corey asserts.  
 Corey asserts that crabapples are edible.  
 Therefore, Dex believes that crabapples are edible.

Beyond these systemizing and “first-orderizing” benefits, what is also striking about the linguistic and inferential practices constituting proposition-talk is that they exhibit an impressive degree of explanatory and predictive success. This is especially true of the portion of proposition-talk falling under what is commonly called ‘folk-psychology’.<sup>4</sup> Many take this success to underwrite the conclusion that propositions exist (Horwich, 1998, pp. 86–90; Moore, 1999, pp. 2–3). On this line of thought, propositions are theoretical entities whose postulation is vindicated by inference to the best explanation.

The problem, however, is that, in different contexts, our practices pull us in different directions regarding the nature of propositions. Many competing accounts of their nature have been offered, but none covers the whole range of practices belonging to proposition-talk in a fully satisfying way. I believe this reflects a genuine indeterminacy in propositional identity conditions and not just a gap in theorizing. One reason for this is that basic assumptions that seem necessary to cover some of our practices are fundamentally opposed to assumptions that appear necessary to handle others. I will elaborate on this point presently. Slightly less persuasive, but still notable, is the continued lack of consensus on propositions, even among philosophers committed to their existence. More significantly, the assortment of competing theories and their inadequacies are most apparent in the domain of discourse thought to provide the strongest evidence for propositions: folk-psychology. All this noted, my aim here is the more modest one of exploring how one could retain proposition-talk (without falling into a version of sententialism) *if* one concluded that there are no determinate identity conditions for propositions (Quine, 1960, Ch. 6).<sup>5</sup> After all, this conclusion would strongly suggest, in accord with Quine’s ontolog-

<sup>3</sup> Of course, ‘that’-clauses do not always function this way; they can also serve as adjectives. Contrast the uses of the co-typical ‘that’-clauses in ‘That I read last month was surprising’ and in ‘The book that I read last month was surprising’. But this fact comports well with my view that when ‘that’-clauses do seem to function as singular terms (as in the former claim), this is really just part of a pretense.

<sup>4</sup> Churchland (1981) notwithstanding.

<sup>5</sup> Note that this indeterminacy is different from that of vagueness. Vague notions may involve unclear, borderline cases, but there are still some conditions under which it is determinate (if not empirically determinable) that something is, e.g., a heap, and even the same heap (as the one I saw a moment ago, for example). Many, if not most, of our ordinary concepts are vague in this sense. The potential problem with the notion of a proposition is more serious: there appears to be no unified account of the conditions for being a proposition at all, let alone for being the same proposition.

ical maxim, “No entity without identity,” that propositions do not exist (Quine, 1948, p. 4; 1969, pp. 19, 23; 1981, p. 107; 1986).

For present purposes, the problems confronting attempts to give proposition-talk a realistic interpretation are the issue. Joseph Moore offers a tidy framework for examining competing theories of propositions, one classifying them according to their positions on two aspects of propositional identity conditions: structure and opacity (Moore, 1999). Consider first the aspect of structure and, in particular, views characterizing propositions as *unstructured* entities, such as sets of possible worlds or situations. This sort of view faces a general problem with respect to logical consequence: it makes belief closed under entailment (Richard, 1990, pp. 10–11). Take the premises of any valid deductive argument. The set of possible worlds in which their conjunction is true just is the set of worlds in which their conjunction with the conclusion is true (given the definition of validity). But then these different conjunctions express the same proposition, and thus the different ‘that’-clauses formed from them name the same proposition.

As a result, on a view that takes propositions to be unstructured, anyone who believes, for example, that gurus teach only those who do not teach themselves, and Guru Zev taught everyone who lives in Albany also believes that gurus teach only those who do not teach themselves, and Guru Zev taught everyone who lives in Albany, *and Guru Zev does not live in Albany*. However, it seems possible for someone to understand and believe the premises of the argument but fail to draw (and even explicitly disbelieve) the conclusion, and for us to attribute beliefs accordingly. In doing so, we typically do not think of such a person as both believing and not believing the same proposition. So, in some contexts the practices that constitute proposition-talk clearly tell against accounts of propositions as unstructured. Moreover, if any arguments that some contexts of proposition-talk do require thinking of propositions this way (e.g., Moore, 1999; Cresswell, 2002) worked, that would just further indicate that our practices pull us in opposite directions regarding the nature of propositions (here on the aspect of structure).

I find the arguments for treating propositions as unstructured inadequate, so I will henceforth focus on accounts that view propositions as structured entities. However, even assuming that our practices institute a presumption in favor of these accounts, a problematic indeterminacy threatens when we turn to the other aspect of propositional identity conditions: opacity. The question here is whether these identity conditions are *opaque* or *transparent*. This issue traces back to the dispute between Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell regarding whether propositions are complexes of representational elements, e.g., Frege’s “modes of presentation” or senses (Frege, 1892, 1918), or complexes of worldly elements, e.g., Russell’s “terms” or individuals, properties, and relations (Russell, 1903).

The problem along the opacity axis is again most familiar from our intentional-attitude-ascribing practices. Some contexts of ascription seem to require propositions with opaque identity conditions; others appear to relate thinkers to propositions with transparent identity conditions. These different contexts are often discussed under the categories of *de dicto* and *de re* attitude ascription. On the one hand, there are ascriptions that ostensibly relate thinkers to propositions the ascriptions individuate in virtue of the expressions used to pick them out, for instance,

- (1) Corey believes that the author of *Huckleberry Finn* is a brilliant writer, but she disbelieves that the author of *Roughing It* is a brilliant writer.

Even though we (unlike Corey) know that the author of *Huckleberry Finn* just is the author of *Roughing It*, (1) does not impugn Corey's rationality (Schiffer, 2000, p. 4). Rather, we hold that the proposition she disbelieves differs from the one she believes. The identity conditions for these propositions are opaque because the terminological difference in the two 'that'-clauses makes for a difference in the propositions they denote, even though the different terms have the same reference in their unembedded uses.<sup>6</sup> *De dicto* attributions like (1) fit with Fregean accounts of propositions, since the relevant difference is one in modes of presentation (or, in neo-Fregean terminology, *concepts*) of a single object.

As is well known, however, there are also contexts in which attitude ascriptions are most naturally read as *de re* rather than *de dicto*. In these cases which objects and properties an ascription relates a thinker to are what matter; how the attribution picks those items out and how the thinker thinks of them are both irrelevant. Consider the claim

(2) Regarding cancer specialists and heart specialists, on the matter of being compassionate, Dex believes that the former are more so than the latter.

Although admittedly a bit contrived, (2) is a completely legitimate belief attribution, and the exportation of all the terms from the 'that'-clause makes it most plausibly read as relating Dex to a proposition with transparent identity conditions. We can use different terms to make the same attribution so long as they pick out the same objects and relation – 'oncologists' could replace 'cancer specialists' and 'cardiologists' could replace 'heart specialists' (and perhaps 'more commiserative than' could replace 'more compassionate than'). Because (2) concerns only the objects and properties specified (rather than any concepts employed by Dex or the speaker) and the relation it attributes is a relation to a proposition, a *de re* ascription like (2) denotes a proposition with transparent identity condition. This sort of context thus supports a Russellian account of propositions.

Beyond the cases considered thus far, there are also contexts of attitude ascription that support neither a pure Fregean nor a pure Russellian view, but which appear to relate thinkers to propositions that must be understood as composed partially of objects and partially of concepts (Horwich, 1998, p. 91). Consider the attribution

(3) Corey believes (of herself) that she is shorter than Santa Claus.

This case apparently relates Corey to a proposition composed of an object (namely, Corey herself), the concept SANTA CLAUS (since 'Santa Claus' denotes no object), and either the concept SHORTER THAN or the relation of being shorter than. The individuation of the proposition believed in terms of the referent of 'she' rather than the pronoun's sense or character fits with our practice of distinguishing what (3) relates Corey to from the proposition Isabel is related to by

(4) Isabel believes (of herself) that she is shorter than Santa Claus.

There has been considerable discussion of the tensions just identified within our attitude-ascribing practices. Something this discussion has not emphasized, however, is that once we understand attitude ascription as a special case of proposition-talk, it is easy to see that the indeterminacy threatening here is not peculiar to attitude reports. Rather, it

<sup>6</sup> Schiffer, 2000, pp. 10–11 points out that even co-typical 'that'-clause tokens can denote different propositions. See also Rumfitt, 1993, pp. 451–452.

is a problem that arises in proposition-talk generally. Consider attributions of meaning made by specifying the propositions that sentences express. There are intuitively *de dicto* contexts of attribution, as in

(5) ‘Der Morgenstern scheint morgens’ means/says (expresses the proposition) that the morning star appears in the morning, but it does not mean/say (express the proposition) that the evening star appears in the morning.

However, there are also *de re* contexts of meaning attribution, as in

(6) Regarding Venus, ‘Der Morgenstern scheint morgens’ means/says (expresses the proposition) that it appears in the morning.

Similar uses of exportation will generate examples showing the same problem arising in other sorts of proposition-talk, e.g., talk about assertions, commands, modal properties, etc.

What all this illustrates is that even assuming proposition-talk treats propositions as structured entities (a thesis that itself might not hold for all cases), in different contexts our talk and inferential practices support different understandings of what kind of structured entities propositions are. It might seem tempting at this point to adopt *pluralism* and claim that there is more than one kind of proposition (Horwich, 1998, pp. 90–91; Moore, 1999, p. 15; Cresswell, 2002, p. 643; Katz, 2003). However, pluralism generates its own worries, including disputes about how many kinds of propositions there are (two, per Katz and perhaps Cresswell? three, per Horwich? four, per Moore?), as well as counting problems in the context of questions about, e.g., the number of things Corey believes on the topic of American literature. Even assuming (1) presents all of her beliefs on this topic, pluralist views would say either (per Katz) that she believes four things (propositions) or that she believes eight things (per Horwich or Moore) and reject the natural answer that she believes two things (taking disbelief as a kind of belief).

Perhaps more importantly, pluralism threatens intuitive connections between meaning and truth. Since propositions are supposed to be what utterances mean, if, per a seeming underpinning of pluralism, the different kinds of propositions have autonomous truth-values, then even a claim like

(7) Crabapples are edible

appears to mean either two or four different things, not all of which connect with (7)’s truth-conditions (which concern certain *objects* having a particular *property*). But then some meanings do not satisfy the intuitive connection between meaning and truth captured in the *meaning-to-truth conditional*:

(MTC) If *S* means that *p*, then *S* is true iff *p*.

Even someone who denies that meaning is *explained* in terms of truth-conditions (e.g., a deflationist about truth) will still want to accept (MTC) as a constraint on how the notions of truth and meaning are related. We should be suspicious of accounts of propositions that do not satisfy this minimal constraint.

Rejecting pluralism, the reflections offered above indicate an indeterminacy in propositional identity conditions, and thereby strongly suggest that there are no propositions. At the same time, however, they also point to an approach one can take in order to save the advantages a realistic interpretation of proposition-talk offers when such an interpretation is no longer sustainable.

### 3. Propositions and pretense

Because my concern is how to accommodate a rejection of propositions, I will not go into detail regarding the many responses that propositionalists have offered to the identity-conditions problem. I can, however, introduce my own view of proposition-talk by contrasting it both with attempts to construct an account of propositions that covers all contexts of the talk, and with opposing attempts to provide a “proposition-free” interpretation of it. I take each of these ways of replying to involve its own, distinctive mistake. The first mistakenly assumes that propositions must exist for proposition-talk to be a means of making useful, true claims; the second mistakenly assumes that proposition-talk is literally about something other than propositions (e.g., sentences).

My account maintains that, while proposition-talk implicates propositions when taken at face value, and while we can use this talk to make genuinely true assertions about people’s utterances and mental states, none of this requires that propositions exist. Because my account avoids being an error theory in spite of its rejection of propositions, it can still accommodate the predictive and explanatory success cited as evidence for propositions. All of this is possible on my view because I understand proposition-talk to function via *semantic pretense*. The basic idea is that proposition-talk is a figurative and indirect discourse rather than a literal and direct one.

The notion of semantic pretense stems from Kendall Walton’s work in aesthetics (Walton, 1990, 1993), but it has been fruitfully applied in other areas of philosophy as well.<sup>7</sup> While technically a kind of fictionalism, a distinctive feature of the pretense approach is that, while it takes certain claims to function in virtue of a pretense, it still views these claims as making serious assertions about the world because of the special kind of pretense involved. The relevant kind of pretense is most familiar from children’s games of make-believe. The interesting aspect of make-believe is that some of what is *to be pretended* by participants in the game depends on the state of the world outside of the game. Games of make-believe involve principles of generation, rules that determine how actual circumstances combine with the game’s stipulated pretenses to determine what further pretenses are prescribed (Walton, 1990, pp. 37–38). Within the context of a game of make-believe, then, there are two kinds of prescribed pretenses: those that are the stipulative ground of the game – what is *expressly made-believe* – and those that are *generated from reality* (Crimmins, 1998, p. 5).

To see how this works, consider the children’s game of mudpies. In this game of make-believe, certain pretenses are stipulated: patty-shaped globs of mud count as pies, the hollow stump counts as an oven, etc. Following this, certain other pretenses are prescribed depending on what happens in the real world. If someone puts a patty-shaped glob of mud into the hollow stump, it is to be pretended that she has put a pie in the oven. By including pretenses generated from reality, a game of make-believe establishes a systematic dependency between some of what is to be pretended and real-world conditions obtaining outside of the game.

As a result, a game of make-believe provides a mechanism through which a speaker can, by making as if to say one thing, succeed in making quite a different, albeit still serious

<sup>7</sup> On pretense-based accounts of existence-talk, see Walton, 1990, Ch. 11; Evans, 1982, Ch.10; Kroon, 1996. For pretense-theoretic accounts of other fragments of discourse (metaphor, possible-worlds-talk, attitude ascription, and truth-talk), see Walton, 1993; Yablo, 1996; Crimmins, 1998; and Woodbridge, 2001, 2005.

assertion about the world. For example, if in talking about two children playing the mudpies game I say

(8) Corey stole one of Dex's pies out of the oven

my utterance employs pretenses from the make-believe, but there is still a sense in which I make a serious assertion – just not one about pies or an oven. Sincerely uttering (8) as part of the mudpies game offers the pretenses displayed in the utterance as prescribed or appropriate. According to the rules of the game, they are if and only if certain real-world conditions obtain, namely those specified in

(9) Corey removed from the hollow stump, a glob of mud that Dex had fashioned and put into the stump.

Uttering (8), therefore, expresses a commitment to the obtaining of these real-world conditions.

Understood as a pretense-employing claim, (8) still makes a genuinely true assertion whenever the pretenses displayed in the utterance are prescribed, because that is when the real-world conditions to which it expresses a commitment obtain. These are also exactly the conditions in which (9) makes a true assertion. Thus, a pretense-employing way of talking can serve as a means of making genuinely true, serious assertions *indirectly*, that is, as a way of engaging in “indirectly serious discourse” (Crimmins, 1998, p. 32). Even though (8) involves pretense, my uttering it can serve a serious purpose, for instance, explaining why Dex is crying. An appeal to make-believe thus allows for, rather than undermines, the serious purposes certain ways of talking serve. And if some discourse is problematic when taken at face value, an appeal to pretense might explain how it serves any serious purposes at all. Thus, we might solve certain philosophical problems by recognizing make-believe at work in ways of talking where it has not been noticed before.

It is important to recognize that a pretense-based account of some discourse is not an account of speakers' attitudes. A speaker who has uttered (8) would probably think of herself as somewhat engaged in the make-believe in which the utterance counts as a move; the same might be true of speakers using metaphors. It is not true, however, that the vast majority of people making attitude ascriptions or otherwise employing ‘that’-clauses think of themselves as pretending anything. But this is neither here nor there from the perspective of a pretense analysis of some discourse. Pretense comes in as part of the account of how the talk functions semantically, not as part of an account of what speakers take themselves to be doing. The use of a way of talking so explained is like the use of a figure of speech that is best understood in terms of a game of make-believe; the speaker does not have to engage in the game behind the talk in order to use the talk (Crimmins, 1998, pp. 10, 14–15).<sup>8</sup> In fact, she need not even be aware that the talk's functioning involves pretense. This is similar to the way that a speaker's reference to some object or kind might involve a causal-historical chain or deference to the identifying capacity of experts, without her knowing that it does

<sup>8</sup> Crimmins talks of speakers being engaged in *shallow* pretense. While I agree with what he says about the level (specifically, lack) of a speaker's engagement with the pretense a way of talking involves, characterizing speakers as pretending in any sense (even “shallowly”) risks creating a major obstacle for certain theorists suspicious of the approach. I am therefore willing to give the naysayers the word ‘pretend’ in this context: speakers (other than a very small minority) are *not* pretending when they use proposition-talk. Still, we should understand these fragments of discourse to be “as if” ways of talking that involve a systematic dependency on how things actually are, and we should explain this “as if” aspect in terms of pretense, specifically, games of make-believe.

(Kripke, 1980; Putnam, 1975). A theorist offering an accurate account of that fragment of discourse will need to mention pretense to explain what claims about the world its instances make (and how they do this), but no one needs to engage in the games of make-believe that figure in the explanation of how pretense-involving ways of talking function (Yablo, 2001).

My pretense view of proposition-talk is modeled on Mark Crimmins's pretense-based account of attitude ascription. The make-believe Crimmins postulates behind attitude ascription is similar to the one Walton (1990, Ch. 11) suggests for existence-talk in that both stipulate pretending that every referring expression has a bearer. What gets added in the context of attitude ascriptions is that each term, or, more generally, each mode of presentation (linguistic or mental), picks out a distinct thing (Crimmins, 1998, pp. 9–10, 23).<sup>9</sup> The pretenses displayed in an attitude ascription (namely, that someone has a thought about one of these distinct objects) are prescribed just in case, really, the thinker has a thought employing (something like) the mode of presentation used in the attribution. So the serious assertion made indirectly with a claim like

(10) Hammurabi believed that Hesperus is visible in the evening

is that Hammurabi has an evening-visibility-attributing belief using the Hesperus-mode of presentation (Crimmins, 1998, p. 28).

To cover cases where different modes of presentation actually present the same object, the pretense also includes principles governing identity-talk, according to which it is to be pretended that the identity relation is “promiscuous” – i.e., that it is a relation that can hold between “different” (pretend) objects. The real-world conditions prescriptive for pretending this relation holds between two or more (pretend) objects are that the modes of presentation “providing” the different (pretend) objects all co-refer outside of the game (Crimmins, 1998, p. 35). As Crimmins notes, there is independent motivation for this sort of view as a way to account for the seemingly contradictory way we use identity-talk in claims like

(11) The situation with Hesperus and Phosphorus is that *they are identical*.

On such a view, the serious assertion the utterance of (11) makes indirectly is that the object the Hesperus-mode of presentation presents is the object the Phosphorus-mode of presentation presents. With this addition, Crimmins's account can accommodate the Fregean (or even mixed) criteria for truth that certain contexts of attitude ascription demand, while maintaining an intuitive semantic innocence that treats all attitude reports as intrinsically *de re*, i.e., as having Russellian logical form relating people to objects, properties, and relations (not to modes of presentation).

My account of proposition-talk moves beyond Crimmins's account of attitude reports first by modifying the application of the pretense approach to this portion of our talk. Crimmins characterizes attitude ascriptions as (in the make-believe) relating thinkers to objects, properties, and relations, and not explicitly to propositions (Crimmins, 1998, p. 16).<sup>10</sup> He thereby glosses over the way we use ‘that’-clauses as singular terms in proposi-

<sup>9</sup> For simplicity, I follow Crimmins and discuss the view only as it pertains to term expressions, but presumably the same principles apply to different ways of attributing (even the same) features.

<sup>10</sup> Crimmins describes the belief ascription ‘Hammurabi believes that Hesperus is brighter than Phosphorus’ as feeling like it simply talks about Hammurabi, believing, Hesperus, brightness, and Phosphorus. More explicitly, on p. 10 he describes a particular *de re* belief ascription as “designed for relating Hammurabi to *Hesperus* without entailing anything special about how he thinks of the *thing*” (italics added).

tion-talk. But we can easily accommodate this practice, while maintaining the semantic innocence Crimmins is after, by explicitly stipulating that in the pretense ‘that’-clauses denote Russellian propositions. Within the make-believe, then, attitude reports relate thinkers to (pretend) Russellian *complexes* of (pretend) objects, properties, and relations; ‘that’-clauses employing different terms denote distinct propositions.

It is easy to see how this pretense-based Russellian account of propositions covers the full range of different cases that arise along the opacity axis. Consider again the Frege-favoring case,

- (1) Corey believes that the author of *Huckleberry Finn* is a brilliant writer, but she disbelieves that the author of *Roughing It* is a brilliant writer.

In the make-believe just outlined, the two ‘that’-clauses, ‘that the author of *Huckleberry Finn* is a brilliant writer’ and ‘that the author of *Roughing It* is a brilliant writer’, denote different Russellian propositions because one has the (pretend) object picked out by ‘the author of *Huckleberry Finn*’ as a constituent, and the other has the “different” (pretend) object picked out by ‘the author of *Roughing It*’ as a constituent instead. One important point illustrated here is that the “objects” (and “properties”) that expressions contribute to a proposition in the make-believe are all pretend entities, even if outside of the game the expressions pick out genuine entities.

The account covers cases suggesting mixed identity conditions equally well. For instance, in the make-believe, the ‘that’-clause in

- (3) Corey believes (of herself) that she is shorter than Santa Claus,

(pretend-)denotes a Russellian proposition composed of the (pretend) objects picked out (in the make-believe) by ‘she’ (which in the make-believe still inherits its referent anaphorically from ‘Corey’) and ‘Santa Claus’, and the (pretend) relation attributed (in the make-believe) with ‘is shorter than’. Names like ‘Santa Claus’ that in fact have no referent pose no problem for this pretense-based Russellian account because in the make-believe there is always an object named that can be a constituent of the proposition.

Although the initial purpose of the appeal to pretense is dealing with questions regarding the opacity of propositional identity conditions, it also helps in dealing with certain questions about structure. My account explains propositions as structured entities, but shifting the pretense’s focus to ‘that’-clauses makes the view equally applicable to cases where it might be plausible to hold that a difference in embedded-sentence structure does not make for a difference in propositions (for example, when the different structures are truth-functionally equivalent). All we need to do to allow this is add certain rules governing ‘that’-clauses to the make-believe behind identity-talk, specifically, rules stipulating that the “different” propositions (pretend-)denoted, e.g., by ‘that’-clauses embedding sentences that are truth-functional variants of one another, are also “identical” (in the pretend way that different entities can be identical).

Since the potential indeterminacy motivating the appeal to pretense in the case of attitude reports arises in proposition-talk generally, I move further beyond Crimmins’s account of attitude ascription by extending the application of pretense to proposition-talk as a whole. I take all instances of this talk to be based on a game of make-believe stipulating that different ‘that’-clauses denote distinct Russellian propositions. Within the make-believe, propositional identity conditions are always transparent, but the pretense that each expression picks out a distinct object or relation collapses the distinction between transparent and

opaque. This collapse eliminates any indeterminacy in propositional identity conditions that our practices might generate. This blocks the Quinean objection to the existence of propositions, but only in the context of a pretense.

Like other pretense-employing discourses, proposition-talk is a means of making indirectly, certain assertions that cannot (or cannot easily) be made directly. As I see it, the main purpose of this pretense is to provide a practical means for speakers to talk about certain complex use-features of linguistic items and cognitive states.<sup>11</sup> The kinds of features I have in mind are those included in what are sometimes called “long-arm conceptual roles”. In addition to narrow computational or inferential role (that is, the position an utterance or thought-state occupies in an inferential network, determining what it follows from and what follows from it) these use-features include the sorts of connections to the world that Hartry Field calls “indication relations” (certain causal relations, including perceptual connections to the world), as well as certain social factors and inferential and causal connections to actions (Field, 1994, pp. 253–256; 2001, 2001a, pp. 75–76; 2001b and 2001c, pp. 158–159; Brandom, 1994, pp. 119–120 and Ch. 4). Direct specifications and attributions of these use-features would inevitably be extremely long, complicated, and technical. By instituting an indirect semantic path via the pretense it invokes, proposition-talk allows speakers to talk about these matters with just the lexical, linguistic and logical devices of ordinary thing-talk.

Moreover, the pretenses proposition-talk involves offer an important expressive advantage by producing something like a collapse of the distinction between use and mention. Proposition-talk involves a kind of deferred ostension, giving speakers a way to pick out the use-features they attribute by displaying them through the use of sentences that have the features in question (Davidson, 1968; Loar, 1976, pp. 147–148; Rumfitt, 1993; Brandom, 1994, Ch. 8; Heal, 2001). In addition to these practical advantages, proposition-talk also allows for natural language formulations of certain otherwise inexpressible, general claims about the sorts of use-features the talk attributes indirectly. Talking as if there were propositions implements a means of attributing generalized (in the sense of being schematic) use-features, as in

(12) Everything Dex asserts is something he believes.

This utterance attributes a “schematic” long-arm conceptual role to all the sentences Dex utters assertorically, one similar to a “schematic” long-arm conceptual role possessed, for example, by some mentalese sentences he has in his belief-box (Schiffer, 1981; Field, 1978; Quine, 1986).<sup>12</sup> The pretense of propositions avoids the need to incorporate into our language new, complicated logical and linguistic devices (like schematic sentence variables and substitutional quantification) of the sorts we would need to make this kind of claim directly. The pretense of proposition-talk thus puts familiar linguistic resources to useful, new purposes, extending the expressive capacity of the language in a conceptually and logico-syntactically conservative way.

<sup>11</sup> This constitutes the most significant difference between my view of proposition-talk and Crimmins’s account of attitude ascription. Crimmins’s account still involves the assumption that intentional-attitude-talk attributes real relations (albeit, more complex ones than the simple two-place relations it appears to attribute) between thinkers and real Russellian propositions. I maintain that all proposition-talk involves pretense, and the notion of a proposition has no application outside of the make-believe behind the talk.

<sup>12</sup> I use this terminology/picture of belief simply as an example without intending to link my account to the correctness of this model.

#### 4. Conclusions

I have presented an account of proposition-talk that vindicates the talk even if worries about propositional identity conditions lead us to deny the existence of propositions. By explaining the talk's functioning in terms of semantic pretense, the account accommodates our seemingly realist linguistic and inferential practices and reveals the practical and expressive advantages proposition-talk incorporates into a language, even if it operates via a pretense. Of particular importance is the way this talk extends the expressive capacity of our language, for example, by providing a means of making schematic general claims without appeal to new, complicated logical and linguistic devices. An especially beneficial role proposition-talk plays is that of giving speakers a way to pick out (mention) use-features of linguistic expressions, and attribute them to other linguistic and mental items, by displaying these features in use. Moreover, recognizing this role illuminates how propositions and truth are connected: they are reciprocal notions, since truth-talk takes mentioned sentences and generates something equivalent to their use.

Although presented in the context of rejecting propositions, a final notable aspect of this view is that one could adopt it even if propositions existed. It would follow that we never talk about these entities directly (nor even indirectly, if I am right about the serious content of proposition-talk), but the pretense approach allows for a kind of neutrality on the ontological issue. The main point is that it is useful to talk as if propositions exist, whether they do or not.

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