How can some thing say something?

1. Background

Russell's multiple relation theory of judgement (MRTJ) brings to the fore two related matters, more general than judgement itself, which Russell found perplexing in the first decade of the century and beyond: the nature of complexes and the twofold nature of verbs.[1] The problem of the unity of the proposition, which in turn lies at the heart of the difficulties Russell encountered with MRTJ, are special cases of these more general ones. The general ones arise whether or not we are concerned to find an account of judgement.

Must we regard complexes as something "over and above" their constituents? Russell answered negatively in the case of what he calls aggregates. "Such a whole", he says, "is completely specified when all its simple constituents are specified" (PoM, p. 140). Some wholes do not meet this condition, and are to be called "unities". For example, the unity *A differs from B* cannot be completely specified by its constituents, since these may form simply an aggregate of the terms, A, difference and B, or alternatively the proposition that B differs from A.

In PoM, he claims that "such a whole [sc. a unity] is always a proposition" (PoM p. 139); in other words, all unities are

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[1]The importance of these two problems was brought home to me by Griffin (1993).

propositions.[2] If we hold to this, two potential problems fuse into one: how can meanings form any kind of unity? And how can they form the distinctively propositional kind of unity?

However, Russell does not, and should not, hold that all unities are propositions. For example, a fact will count as a unity, by the test of not being exhausted by its components; so, in particular, will Othello's judging that Desdemona loves Cassio.

The other general problem is discussed in PoM in terms of the "twofold nature of the verb" (PoM, p. 49): on the one hand it may be a relating relation and, on the other, a relation in itself (PoM, p. 100). "A relation is one thing when it relates, and another when it is merely enumerated as a term in a collection" (PoM p. 140). When we say that music is the food of love, the verb or relation *love* appears in itself. When we say that Desdemona loves Cassio, *love* appears in such a way as to relate Desdemona and Cassio.

Russell makes plain that the two problems are connected: "Owing to the way in which the verb actually relates the terms of a proposition, every proposition has a unity which renders it distinct from the sum of its constituents" (PoM, p. 52). In itemizing the constituents, the verb or relation appears "in itself" as opposed to "as relating"; so the proposition is more than just its constituents.

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[2]This appears inconsistent with his discussion of denoting complexes, which meet the test for being unities rather than aggregates but which are not propositions.

Various difficulties supposedly emerge from the phenomena mentioned.

> 1) An adequate account of the phenomena involves contradiction (PoM, p. 48).
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> 2) We are at a loss to say what a proposition is.
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> 3) Unities which are not aggregates pose a threat to pluralism.
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> 4) There's a special problem about falsehood, quite independently of any theory of judgement: it seems that if, in the unity *Desdemona loves Cassio*, *love* really relates Desdemona and Cassio, then Desdemona loves Cassio.
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> 5) There's a problem for the MRTJ.

Russell's rather casual remark in "Lectures on the Philosophy of Logical Atomism" that the MRTJ's treatment of the verb was "a little unduly simple" seems a little unduly disappointing. Had no progress been made in 15 years?

On what would nowadays seem the central topic, the nature of propositions, I think the answer is no.[3] We understand better how Russell failed to address this problem when we see that his primary

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[3] I do not mean to imply that he had not tried to make progress. But it is not clear that in his modifications of MRTJ, chronicled by Candlish (1996) and by Griffin (1985, 1986), he had grasped that the root of his problems lay not with judgement but with propositions. I am not aware of any evidence for the view that it would have been obvious to Russell that Wittgenstein was right in writing to him in 1913 that the problems with the theory of judgement "can only be removed by a correct theory of propositions" (Wittgenstein 1974, R. 13).

concern was the consistency of the existence of unities with pluralism (number 3 in the list above). He was less concerned to say what unities are than to show that allowing them was consistent with his overall philosophy, in which pluralism is underpinned by analysis. This is brought out by a comparison of his response to Bradley with his positional statement of the nature of "analytic realism". He writes:

> Mr. Bradley finds an inconsistency in my simultaneous advocacy of a strict pluralism and of "unities which are complex and which cannot be analysed into terms and relations". It would seem that everything here turns upon the sense in which such unities cannot be analysed. What I admit is that no enumeration of their constituents will reconstitute them, since any such enumeration gives us a plurality, not a unity. But I do not admit that they are not composed of their constituents; and what is more to the purpose, I do not admit that their constituents cannot be considered truly unless we remember that they are their constituents. (Russell 1910, p. 354)

No hint here of a positive account of what a unity is. The consistency of unities with the overall project is given pride of place in this passage from "Le réalisme analytique":

> Elle [cette philosophie] est analytique, puisqu'elle soutient que l'existence du complexe dépend de l'existence du simple, and non pas *vice versa*, et que le constituant d'un complexe est absolument identique, comme constituant, à ce qu'il est en lui-même quand on ne considère pas ses relations. Cette

> philosophie est donc une philosophie atomique. (Russell 1911, p. 410)

Concern with the admissibility of unities might distract from concern with their nature.

2. How to solve the problem: Candlish's suggestions

One could think of "the" problem of the unity of the proposition as composed of several related sub-problems:

> (i)   how does one distinguish, among collections of meanings, between those which can be arranged so as to say something (e.g. Desdemona, love and Cassio) and those which cannot be so arranged (e.g. Desdemona and Cassio)?
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> (ii)   given a collection of meanings (e.g. Desdemona, love and Cassio), how does one distinguish between those arrangements of that collection which do say something (e.g. that Desdemona loves Cassio) and those that do not (e.g. that love Desdemona Cassio)?
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> (iii)   given a collection of meanings which can be arranged so as to say more than one thing (e.g. Desdemona, love and Cassio), how does one distinguish between the things (e.g. between saying that Desdemona loves Cassio and saying that Cassio loves Desdemona)?
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> (iv)   given a collection of meanings arranged so as to say just one thing, what cements the meanings together in the required way? What is the nature of the further ingredient or entity involved, here referred to as "arrangement", over and above the meanings themselves?

I think the central puzzle is located in (iv) and that the others serve to illustrate that (iv) is genuinely puzzling.

Candlish (1996), following Russell, gives central place to a special case of (iii), the case I employed in illustrating (iii). He suggests that either of two moves made by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* would have resolved this problem. One is to think of propositions as linguistic rather than non-linguistic, for then unity can be acknowledged without automatic creation of the represented fact. The other is to think of propositional signs as themselves facts, so that there is no need for an explicitly represented relation to be both a propositional constituent and the source of propositional unity. I think it is questionable whether either move is necessary or sufficient for a solution.

Consider the first of these suggestions: the unity of a sentence (i.e. of a proposition thought of as something linguistic) can be acknowledged without automatic creation of the represented fact. Perhaps the thought is that one can allow that the sentence "Cassio loves Desdemona" is a unity, in that it says something, without being obliged to say that Cassio loves Desdemona. But if a sentence can say something false, why should not a collection of meanings? Perhaps it is easy to think of a sentence as ordered, and order can play a special role in connection with problem (iii). But if order is allowed in the story, it can also play a special role in ordering the meanings themselves, a role well adapted to solving problem (iii). I can find only one relevant difference between the level of meanings and the level of language. At the former, Russell seems to have

been tempted to explain what it is for a collection of meanings to say something by the fact that its verb "really relates" its terms; it is not tempting to explain what it is for a collection of words to say something by the fact that the verb really relates the names or their referents. However, since Russell realized that the temptation had to be resisted, on pain of making falsehood impossible, this does not appear to be a difference which matters.

Merely moving to the level of language does not seem to make a significant difference, let alone to suffice for a solution. It seems clear that the linguistic analogues of the four problems above are to be resolved, to the extent that they are well posed, by grammar and semantics. It is not clear why such theories should not be mirrored as theories about meanings, rather than about the words which mean them. For example, a rule which would contribute to answering the linguistic analogue of question (i) is that an atomic sentence, a species of word collection which says something, consists in an n-place predicate and n names, in a certain order. This could be mirrored at the non-linguistic level: an atomic non-linguistic collection of meanings which says something consists in an n-place property and n individuals, in a certain order.

Candlish's other Wittgensteinian suggestion is that "propositions are able to represent facts because the propositional signs are themselves facts" (Candlish 1996, p. 128). If we had a conception of facts which allows for false facts, or for which we can make a distinction between whether the fact exists and whether it is

instantiated, then we make some progress towards a solution.[4] On this view, any appropriately assembled collection of meanings would be a fact. Truth would be a matter of the fact being instantiated; falsehood its not being instantiated. Wittgenstein does indeed have such a conception (standardly translated as "state of affairs"); but it is not to this conception that Candlish draws attention. Rather, what is supposed to do the trick is that the propositional sign itself is a fact.

The fact "*that* 'a' stands to 'b' in a certain relation says *that* aRb" (*Tractatus* 3.1432). What is this "certain relation", and how is it expressed? In the standard example, it can't be the relation of loving, since signs do not love one another. A better candidate would be the relation of flanking an occurrence of "loves". But now it is mysterious why the *fact* that "Desdemona" and "Cassio" are related by this relation should be a better candidate for meaning than just the sentence "Desdemona loves Cassio". To put the worry another way, if it is acceptable to introduce this special syntactic relation (flanking "loves", in the "Desdemona" then "Cassio" order), why would it not be acceptable to introduce an analogous relation at the level of meanings (flanking love, in the Desdemona then Cassio order)? This is just what Othello's thought does to Desdemona and Cassio: it places them in the relation of "flanking" love, i.e. of being thought by Othello to be love-related (in the Desdemona then Cassio order). So it doesn't seem to me that

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[4]We don't get all the way, since there is still a question about what makes for the difference between a fact (e.g. that Desdemona loves Cassio) and a collection of meanings (e.g. Desdemona, love and Cassio).

shifting to regarding the propositional sign as a fact is sufficient to resolve the problem.

I have not explicitly addressed the question of whether either moving to language, or moving to regarding the propositional sign as a fact is necessary for a solution. My view is that neither move is necessary. This will emerge in the light of what I think is required.

3. Another approach to the solution

Are the problems of the unity of the proposition special to Russell's philosophy, or are they still visible from our contemporary perspective? If so, have they been solved, or simply ignored? I think that the problems remain visible, but they are not often explicitly addressed, despite the fact that, or perhaps because, an adequate solution is available within contemporary received wisdom.

Given the amount of criticism Russell's MRTJ has received,[5] it is surprising to find apparently similar theories being advanced, or at least taken seriously, by many influential contemporary writers (for example David Kaplan[6]), who do not indicate that such theories bring into prominence any problem of propositional unity.

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[5]Not just by my fellow symposiast (Candlish 1996) but by Wittgenstein (as chronicled in Griffin 1985), Geach (1957, p. 50), Mackie (1973, p. 28) and many others.

[6]E.g. Kaplan (1977). The recent symposium between François Recanati (1995) and Mark Crimmins (held just a week before the Southampton conference at which this paper was delivered) takes a version of MRTJ seriously without manifesting any sense that it raises a problem of propositional unity.

Admittedly, contemporary theorists unify the meanings as a sequence, rather than taking them individually. This removes certain difficulties: it enables the belief relation to be invariably dyadic, rather than having to have variable adicity; and it addresses problem (iii), the problem of distinguishing the different things which could be said by a collection of meanings as a function of their order. Russell could not have tolerated sequences in a complete analysis, consistently with the no-class theory of classes. But it would be a mistake to suppose that allowing sequences would have resolved his problems. Merely ordering meanings, without further devices, cannot be guaranteed to resolve more than special cases of problem (iii), leaving untouched some issues to do with scope;[7] and it does not so much as address problems (i), (ii) and (iv). Do those who are happy to roll out accounts of judgement in which people are related to sequences of entities have up their sleeves an answer to these problems?

Perhaps some look to the Fregean notion of functional application. However, there is no solution in this quarter. The question of what makes the difference between a collection consisting of a function and its potential arguments, on the one hand, and the "insertion" of these arguments into the function, and their insertion in one rather than another order, is of essentially the same kind as our original

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[7]For example, the ambiguity in "Harry is a dirty window cleaner" is not resolved by linking the meaning to the sequence <Harry, dirty, window, cleaner>, as opposed to some other sequence each of whose members is one of these elements. More complex set-theoretic constructions, sequences with sequences as members, arguably could resolve all these ambiguities.

question. Argument-function unity is of a piece with propositional unity.[8]

One current orthodoxy is that a proposition can be thought of as a set of possible worlds. In its more plausible and cautious form, the set of worlds is not identified with the proposition, but simply specifies truth and identity conditions: a proposition p is true iff the actual world is included in p's associated set, and propositions are identical iff associated with the same set. This theory faces a problem analogous to that of unity: what is the difference between the proposition and the associated set? A proposition manages to say something, to have truth conditions; the set is some kind of model of these. A set cannot be identified with a truth condition, since a condition, unlike a set, is something which can be satisfied (met, fulfilled) or not.

On another version of the possible worlds theory, propositions are simply identical with sets of worlds. This view confronts another problem resembling that of unity: what is it to employ the contemplation of a set of worlds to entertain a thought, rather than simply contemplating it? If we could answer this question, we could solve the problems of unity. This is not the only way in which, in principle, the problems of unity could be solved, since we might also try to solve them by focusing on some non-set-theoretic mode of combination. This alternative approach would claim that to

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[8]Only an erroneous interpretation of Frege (in my opinion) would attribute to him an attempt to explain (as opposed to label) this unity in terms of unsaturatedness.

contemplate anything thus combined is *eo ipso* to entertain a proposition, rather than merely to contemplate some collection of entities.

My view is that a problem deserving the name of that of the unity of the proposition remains for many philosophers; all those, at least, who place sets of worlds at the centre of their semantic theorizing. But not all philosophers do this, and not all face a unity problem. The problem is absent from, for example, a Davidsonian approach to meaning. This is an account of the meaning of sentences which dispenses with meanings as entities, although we will see that this feature is inessential to the approach's capacity to solve the problems of unity.

In a Davidsonian theory, concatenation of the relevant kind is by definition a way of arranging expressions so that the result has a truth condition; which truth condition depends upon the words concatenated and their mode of concatenation. To contemplate an appropriate concatenation of words with understanding is to appreciate its truth condition. There is no unanswered question about how the sentence manages to say something.

The account would not be satisfying unless the way in which concatenation achieves a truth condition were spelled out. In Davidson's approach, this is achieved by a recursive specification of truth conditions. Names are given reference clauses, predicates satisfaction clauses, a general account is given of how names and predicates combine, and in the light of these one can deduce not

only that the result of concatenating an n-ary predicate with n names says something, but what it says.

In Davidson's hands, the approach assumes that we are concerned with language, and that meanings as entities are not required. This feature is inessential. One could borrow the recursive approach in order to specify special truth-condition-conferring ways of concatenating Russellian meanings; in doing this one would solve the problems of the unity of the proposition in more or less the terms in which Russell stated them.

Let us use curly brackets to indicate the truth-condition-conferring mode of concatenating meanings (regarded as non-linguistic entities). An expression like "{Desdemona, love, Cassio}" will refer to the result of concatenating the meanings in the list in the special way. The theory will say that this result is true iff Desdemona loves Cassio. In general, for any n objects, $o_1 \ldots o_n$, and any n-ary universal, φ^n, $\{\varphi^n, o_1 \ldots o_n\}$ is true iff $o_1 \ldots o_n$ are φ^n-related. Providing the truth condition displays the cement, as demanded by problem (iv): the cement consists in the possession of a truth condition, where this is systematically specified. This also resolves which thing is said, as demanded by problem (iii). Problems (i) and (ii) are resolved (for the atomic cases) by dividing the world into individuals and universals, and subdividing universals according to their degree.

I conclude with five observations.

First, the approach is firmly non-reductive. What it is for a concatenation of meanings to say something is explained by the systematic provision of the saying in question. What else could one expect? In Russell's terms, it might be said that we are treating the relevant kind of concatenation as primitive and indefinable. It is not a relation which exists anyhow, ready to be appealed to by the theorist of propositions or judgements. In this sense, it is sui generis.

Russell was quite clear, in the unpublished paper "On Functions" (cited in Griffin 1993), about some necessary conditions for solving the problems: we need to find a distinctive mode of combination (my "concatenation"), which, together with the constituents, determines the complex without itself being a constituent; yet the mode of combination must also be capable, on other occasions, of being a constituent of complexes; on such occasions, it will not be exercising its unifying role. If Russell had borne these points firmly in mind in 1913, his attempt at that time to make use of the notion of logical form in the MRTJ might have taken a different, and Davidsonian, turn: rather than trying to make logical form a constituent of what is judged, each logical form should be seen as one way of concatenating meanings so that something is said. It is the systematic, recursive, progress through the totality of logical forms that makes the Davidsonian account possible.

Second, my suggested approach returns us sharply to Russell's problem of the dual nature of the verb. A constituent of a

concatenation is a universal. We need to extract from it something more relational for the truth condition. I did this by keeping "φ^n" unequivocal, and tacking on "-related" to reveal its role in the truth condition. This just is the shift from relation in itself to relation as really relating. In this setting, "really relating" can unproblematically be understood in the way that Russell feared would lead to objective falsehoods, since the real relating features only on one side of a biconditional. As we might express the unity: the meaning complex {Desdemona, love Cassio} is true iff *love* really relates Desdemona to Cassio.

It may well be an essential feature of this approach that full homophony cannot be achieved, though we can approach it more closely by dividing classes of concatenations more finely. Thus for unary atoms, we can say {a, the property of being F} is true iff a has the property of being F. However, I think homophony may well be not completely attainable, on account of the following tendency. If you think of a proposition as a collection of meanings, and think of meanings as, in the first instance, individuals and properties, then it is hard to resist the thought that a unary atom, for example, is most properly described as attributing a property to an individual. The atom is apparently unary in nature, and not just in name; the truth condition binary (involving an individual, a property, and the attribution relation between them). So there's a tendency to see an extra argument place in every proposition. Although this "extra place" conception is, in my view, incorrect, it does not threaten to generate Bradley's regress.

The third matter is a question: would this apparatus entitle us to Russell's MRTJ? Russell wanted a multiple relation theory because he thought that if judgement related one who judged falsely to a single thing, it would have to be an unpalatable "objective falsehood". On my proposal, there is no such problem, so the most obvious theory of judgement would relate thinkers to concatenations of meanings. However, there might be other reasons for preferring a theory upon which the mind is related simply to the constituents of the concatenations, where to think of these constituents in a certain way is to concatenate them. Given that we can say recursively what it is to concatenate, this need not be regarded as a mysterious mental power. As far as I know, provided we are happy with multigrade relations, there is no obstacle to this development of the theory I offer Russell.

Fourth, I have considered only atomic concatenations of meanings. For those who, like Wittgenstein and Russell at some periods, think that the logical constants do not denote meanings, it will not be obvious how to extend this approach to non-atomic cases. On this view of the logical constants, the very form of the problems would have to be different, since the constants would supply no meanings (regarded as entities) to be concatenated.

Fifth, and finally, the present concerns raise a further question, not yet mentioned. How can mere lifeless words or meanings (understood in Russell's way, as ordinary individuals and properties), however well selected and arranged, say anything at all? If "mere" is supposed to make us focus on the intrinsic and non-

relational properties of words or meanings, then they cannot say anything. They can say something only in virtue of their relational properties, their use. It would be another project to consider the extent to which Russell and Wittgenstein's difficulties about the nature of propositions in the early part of the century can be traced to their not in that period finding room for this crucial notion.

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