

## **'That-clauses in Attitude Predicates: Giving Syntax Its Due'**

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Friederike Moltmann describes her paper as developing an object-based truthmaker semantics for what she calls modal and attitudinal objects, where the former are entities like obligations, permissions, and needs, and the latter are entities like claims, judgments, beliefs, requests, promises, desires, intentions, and hopes. It's not clear to me that she is in fact developing a truthmaker semantics for these objects so much as she is advocating the use of truthmaker semantics over both possible-world and structured-proposition semantics for the 'that *S*' clausal complements (*that*-clauses, for short) that figure in both the nominal phrases that she takes to designate attitudinal objects (e.g., 'the claim that *S*') and the transitive verb attitude predicates that she takes to advert to such objects (e.g., 'claims that *S*'). What she offers by way of a semantic analysis of these phrases and predicates is rather a Davidsonian event semantics, one in which she is particularly concerned, correctly in my view, to treat *that*-clauses not, as relationalists would have it, as singular terms designating propositions, but as predicates.

In my brief comments, I would like to focus on two issues, first on Moltmann's proposed Davidsonian event semantics analysis of transitive verb attitude predicates, and second on the import of what she calls the 'underspecification of content' for the proper interpretation of *that*-clauses. With respect to the first of these issues, I want to focus on her proposed event semantics analysis of transitive verb attitude predicates (e.g., 'believes that *S*'). Specifically, I want to ask about the syntactic motivation for an event semantics analysis of these predicates.

With respect to the second issue, I want to question whether the *that*-clauses that figure in these predicates do what she claims they do, namely provide the truth or satisfaction conditions for attitudinal objects such as beliefs, desires, and the like. I don't think they do, for reasons having to do with what Moltmann calls the 'underspecification of content'. I leave aside in my commentary the general question of what might justify particular inferences regarding the ontology of natural language, a question that goes to heart of what can be gleaned in this regard from an adequate semantics for natural language.

### 1. The Semantics of Attitude Predicates

Moltmann focuses on sentences such as (1a), offering the Davidsonian event semantics analysis given by (1b), her (25a) and (25b) respectively:

- (1) a. John claimed that S.  
 b.  $\exists e(\text{claim}(e, \text{john}) \ \& \ [\text{that } S](\text{att-obj}(e)))$

where the second conjunct of (1b) attributes to *e* the property of being an attitudinal object, one that has the *that*-clause 'that *S*' predicated of it, where the attitudinal object in question is presumably the one also designated by (2):

- (2) John's claim that S

This proposed analysis of (1a) raises a question that, so far as I can see, Moltmann doesn't address: What is the linguistic rationale for introducing reference to an attitudinal object into (1b)? Minimally, one would like something by way of a syntactic rationale for (1b), one that would not only justify introducing *att-obj(e)* into (1b), but also explain why 'that *S*' is predicated

of *att-obj(e)* and not 'claim', given that in transitive verb attitude predicates such as 'claims that S' the *that*-clause seems to be a clausal complement of the verb 'claim'. My point here is that the semantic analysis of a sentence such as (1a) needs to be syntactically motivated. Moltmann does say this regarding (1b), her (25b):

I will assume, certainly simplifying, that there is a unique attitudinal object *att-obj(e)* associated with a Davidsonian event argument *e* of an attitude verb. The clausal complement of the attitude verb will then be predicated of the attitudinal object associated with the event argument. (p.23)

But the question remains: What's the rationale for (1b), specifically for assuming there is a unique attitudinal object *att-obj(e)* 'associated' with *e*, whatever exactly 'associated' means here? After all, on its face (1a) contains no constituent that might be taken to designate any such object, so surely we need a rationale for a semantic analysis that introduces such an object.<sup>1</sup> One place to look might be a syntactic analysis of (1a).

Two proposed syntactic analyses of propositional attitude reports such as (1a), one by Arsenljević (2009) and the other by me (Matthews, *forthcoming*) relate these sentences to their light verb alternations such as (3), where a nominal phrase of the sort that Moltmann takes to designate an attitudinal object appears explicitly:

(3) John made the claim that S.

On our proposed analyses, both (1a) and (3) have a single underlying syntactic form given by (4), one that can receive either (1a) or (3) as its surface spellout:

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<sup>1</sup> A similar question could be raised about the rationale for adopting a Davidsonian event semantics for attitude predicates. The basic question here has to do with what constraints should discipline our semantic analyses.

(4) John [<sub>VP</sub>MAKE [<sub>NP</sub>CLAIM [<sub>CP</sub>that S]]]<sup>2</sup>

The details aren't important here, but on the syntactic analysis I favor, following Harves & Kayne (2010), the transitive surface verb 'claim' is formed by a morphosyntactic process that raises CLAIM and incorporates it into the light verb MAKE, resulting in the verb MAKE-CLAIM, whose surface spell-out is the verb 'claim', which inherits its tense and accusative-licensing properties from the light verb MAKE. The raising of CLAIM leaves behind a trace  $t_i$  which is the head of the trace nominal phrase [<sub>NP</sub>  $t_i$  [<sub>CP</sub> that S]], where the *that*-clause is predicated of the trace, and thus indirectly of the moved CLAIM.

If my proposed syntactic analysis (or Arsenijević's) is correct, it enables us to see why Moltmann might introduce an attitudinal object att-obj(e), of which 'that S' is predicated, into (1b): it enables her to capture the effect of the trace-relation in my syntactic analysis, namely, predicating 'that S' of the raised noun designating John's claim, rather than the verb 'claim'. Presumably part of what drives the introduction of att-obj(e) is Moltmann's desire to treat the surface verb *claim* as a primitive designating an action (of which the claim that S is the product), which on my account (and similarly for Arsenijević's account) it is not, a matter that raises the question of just how (1b) is to be construed. What, specifically, is the relation of (1b) to (1a): Is it giving us the syntactic LF of (1a)? If not, what are the adequacy conditions on a Davidsonian event semantic analysis such as (1b)? This strikes me as an important question, given that (1b)

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<sup>2</sup> I use majusculed terms to designate underlying lexical items (e.g., HAVE) that may or may not have corresponding surface spell-outs. (The subscripted "NP", "VP", "CP", and "DP" have their usual linguistics meanings of noun phrase, verb phrase, complement phrase, and determiner phrase, respectively.)

is offered as a semantic analysis of (1a), and yet (1a) contains no term that is said to refer to a unique attitudinal object ‘associated’ with the event argument *e* of the attitude verb ‘claim’.

An obvious advantage of tying one’s semantic analysis of a sentence quite closely to the syntax of that sentence is that it will enable one to explain inferences that are sensitive to particularities of syntax. Thus, to take an example dear to Moltmann’s heart, relationalists are forever seeing the inference from (5a) to (5b) as evidence that the clausal complement in (5a) functions as a singular term:

- (5) a. John believes that *S*  
 b. John believes something.

Only a semantic analysis that is sensitive to the syntax of (5a), one for example that takes the accusative object of the verb ‘believes’ to be something other than a bare *that*-clause, perhaps as I suggest a trace nominal phrase, would undercut the relationalist assumption that *that*-clauses are singular terms.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Underspecification of ‘Content’

Moltmann says, ‘[complement] clauses act as predicates of modal or attitudinal objects, giving their truthmaking or satisfaction conditions’ (p. 14). Later, regarding beliefs, she says, ‘the clausal complement must give the full truth-conditions of the reported belief’ (fn 21). In this she follows relationalists of all stripes who have wanted to treat the complement clauses of transitive attitude verbs as specifying what someone believes, desires, regrets, etc. when

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<sup>3</sup> Kratzer (2016) proposes a similar view, one according to which the accusative object of the attitude verb is a nominal phrase with a silent head *thing*: [<sub>NP</sub> [*thing*] [<sub>CP</sub> that *S*]].

someone is correctly reported as believing, desiring, regretting, etc. such and such. But this can't be right for precisely the sort of reason Moltmann gives, citing examples from Graff Fara (2013): *that*-clauses often underspecify content of the modal or attitudinal objects of which they are predicated. Indeed, *that*-clauses do not merely sometimes underspecify contents, but as Bach (1997) showed, true attitude reports often fail altogether to specify the content of a person's beliefs, desires, regrets, and so on. Consider Bach's parade example (6):

(6) The Joker believes that Bruce Wayne is a wimp.

The *that*-clause of (6) doesn't give the truth-conditions of the Joker's belief, because Bruce Wayne is Batman, and the Joker clearly doesn't believe that Batman is a wimp! Consider next (7), which may be true belief report, yet not report the full truth-conditions on Sally's belief, if what she believes is that some specific person, e.g., her maid, stole the silver spoon:

(7) Sally believes that someone stole the silver spoon.

Examples such as (6) and (7) lead Bach to conclude that *that*-clauses are mere 'descriptors' of what a person believes, desires, regrets, and so on: they describe content without uniquely specifying it.

Such failures to specify content present a problem for Moltmann's view of *that*-clauses as giving the truth or satisfaction conditions for modal or attitudinal objects. The problem here is not one that a truthmaker semantics can remedy, because the problem has nothing to do with the particular semantics one chooses for *that*-clauses but with the descriptor role that *that*-clauses play in attitude reports. *That*-clauses are indeed predicates, but not ones that

necessarily give the truth or satisfaction conditions of attitudinal objects; at best they may describe to a greater or lesser degree such conditions. If truthmaker semantics has an advantage over possible-worlds accounts, it is presumably its ability to capture better the fine-grainedness of the descriptions provided by the *that*-clauses that figure in attitude reports.

### References

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