

# Singular Propositions

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## Abstract

A singular proposition “is a proposition that is about one of its components by virtue of containing it,” (Salmon 2005, p.1075). Here I argue that singular propositions are the product of a conflation of two different conceptions of propositions, one due to Frege and the other to the early Russell. On the Fregean conception, propositions are representational entities with representational components. A Fregean proposition is about an object because it contains a representational component that is about that object. For the early Russell (Russell 1903), by contrast, propositions are *not* representational and do not have representational components. Propositions are the facts in the world that our sentences and beliefs represent. (A complication for Russell’s early view involves propositions containing denoting concepts. I show how these propositions generated a tension in his conception of propositions, which he resolved with the theory of descriptions in 1905.) This difference between Frege and Russell underlies their famous disagreement about whether Mont Blanc is a component of the proposition that Mont Blanc is over 4000 meters high. The contemporary notion of singular propositions conflates these two conceptions by holding that propositions are representational — they are *about* things — but do not have representational components. Sorting this out leads to three different conceptions of singular propositions: Fregean singular propositions, Russellian singular propositions, and a third kind of *sui generis* singular proposition. Here I show how all three of these face serious problems. Fregean singular propositions, which match the Fregean conception but contain objects, are incoherent. Russellian singular propositions, which match the Russellian, non-representational conception of propositions, insert intermediaries between us and the objects of our beliefs. (Recent examples of this Russellian view can be found in the work of Jeff Speaks and Mark Richard). Finally, *sui generis* singular propositions, which do not match either the Fregean or Russellian conceptions, but which come closest to the contemporary notion, violate compositionality. The lesson is that there is no viable notion of singular propositions. Another goal of the paper is to trace the source of the conflation in the contemporary notion of singular propositions through the development of formal semantics, starting with Frege and continuing in Church, Carnap, Montague and ultimately Kaplan.