Russellian propositions

The single most important ingredient in the conception of logic that informs PoM is the notion of proposition. It combines familiar elements with others which are much less so (although these less familiar elements, or something similar to them, also have advocates among contemporary philosophers). The familiar elements are two:

1. Propositions are *what* is believed (said, asserted, etc.); propositions qua contents.
2. Propositions qua contents are the truth-value bearers.

1. and 2. constitute a *minimal characterization* of propositions. Thus considered, propositions are usually taken to perform a broadly *semantic* or *representational* function:

3. Propositions qua contents are *truth conditions* for ‘propositional attitudes’.

This, however, is not how the early Russell sees the matter. He does accept the minimal characterization, but when he speaks of propositions as truth bearers, he refers to them, rather than their contents, as objects.¹ This terminological choice is quite conscious, indicating his rejection of all kinds of ‘representationalism’, or the view that thought is essentially a matter of representation.

Antirepresentationalism was a relatively stable element in Russell’s thought. It survived the transition to the ‘multiple-relation theory of judgment’ – as in *The Problems of Philosophy* or the *Theory of Knowledge*...
manuscript of 1913 – and was not given up until 1919, when Russell ‘re-psychologized’ propositions. Until then, he was quite unable to understand talk of content except in a way that inevitably led to charges of psychologism; contents, he would argue, are simply ‘states of mind’ or ‘subjective modifications’ (Russell 1913, 41–4). When, for example, he encountered Frege’s notion of thought (Gedanke), he mistook it for a mental item, as is shown by the often-quoted passage from his letter to Frege, dated 12 December 1904:

Concerning Sinn and Bedeutung I cannot see but difficulties which I cannot overcome.... I believe that in spite of all its snowfields Mont Blanc itself is a component part of what is actually asserted in the proposition [Satz], ‘Mont Blanc is over 4000 metres high’. We do not assert the thought, for this is a private psychological matter: we assert the object of the thought, and this is, to my mind, a certain complex (an objective proposition [ein objectiver Satz], one might say) in which Mont Blanc is itself a component part. If we do not admit this, then we get the conclusion that we know nothing at all about Mont Blanc. (Frege 1980, 169)

Russell is emphatic that what is asserted is not a thought; a thought is a private psychological matter, and if assertion were concerned with such entities, the possibility would have to be renounced of our ever really knowing anything. As he saw it, the only way to avoid this untoward consequence was to emphasize that what is asserted is completely independent of anything that relates in any way to the judging mind. An extreme measure, perhaps, but that is how he saw the matter at the time.

This means, above all, that most varieties of representationalism are excluded. Kant, for example, had conceived of judgment as an act whereby representations are brought together in an ‘objective unity’; which means that what renders a judgment independent of this or that particular mind is the fact that the ingredients constituting it are invested with intersubjective rather than merely subjective validity. Russell, on the other hand, holds that judging has nothing whatsoever to do with representing and representations. Therefore, also, differences in the ways representations may be ‘brought together’ cannot explain how what is judged or asserted can be independent of a judging subject; for Russell, independence is a straightforwardly metaphysical matter. When one asserts that Mont Blanc is over 4000 metres high, what one asserts does not in any way represent a certain mountain as being one