Clearing up Clouds:
Nonspecificity and Goal-Sensitivity in Demonstrative Communication

Rory Harder
University of Toronto, Philosophy

Contact Information:
Email: rory.harder@mail.utoronto.ca
Website: www.roryharder.com

Introduction

- The problem of nonspecificity for demonstratives [4, 5] is a new and difficult challenge for theories of meaning and communication.
- King [5] outlines a solution, but it has several issues.
- I propose a novel solution, which develops the way contextual goals help determine what is said by utterances of declarative sentences containing demonstratives. (Based on [7, 1, 2, 3].)

The Problem of Nonspecificity [4, 5]

Beach Case We are sitting on a crowded beach. I utter (1) with not setup or indication of intended referent.

(1) #He's struggling.

Communication is unsuccessful, and there is nothing that has been said.

Tablet Case Suppose we have ordered tablets of the exact same model. They all arrive together in one box. You open the box and I notice that they are all of some other model. I immediately exclaim (2).

(2) That's not the tablet I ordered.

Communication is successful, yet nothing about my manifested referential intentions determines a specific tablet as the referent of my demonstrative.

Car Case We are together in an expensive car dealership. We are standing in front of one of a row of sports cars of the same model. You look at it and utter (3).

(3) That is a beautiful car.

Communication is successful, yet same as above.

Mechanic Case A mechanic and his assistant are fixing a car. They are at a stage in the process where it is clear that a hammer is needed. The mechanic utters (4) and vaguely gestures at his table of tools.

(4) I need that tool now.

Communication is successful, yet same as above.

The Problem of Nonspecificity How is it that in some contexts successful demonstrative communication requires that the speaker indicate a specific referent, but in other contexts that is not required? Why is the beach case defective, but the others not?

King's Solution [5]

Metasemantics For each demonstrative d in a sentence S in a context c, the properly manifested intentions of the speaker in c of S determine the *de facto degree of resolution* of d in c.

Conversational goals For each demonstrative d in a sentence S in a context c, the conversational goals in c determine the *proper degree of resolution* for d in c.

Appropriateness A context c is a appropriate for a sentence S just in case for each demonstrative d in S, the de facto degree of resolution of d in c satisfies the proper degree of resolution of d in c.

Problem...

This proposal is merely schematic. King gestures at "cloudy contextualism" [8, 9, 6], which suggests the following precisification.

Update Equivalence Model

A sentence in context is associated with a cloud of propositions: one for each fully specific candidate resolution of all contained context-sensitive expressions. The fundamental goal of conversation is to update the context set with a determinate piece of information. So a context is appropriate for a sentence just in case every member of the cloud leads to the same update.

Problems...

- This proposal may treat the tablet case properly, since it is common ground that the tablets are all of the same model. However, it mishandles the car and mechanic cases. For the utterance to be felicitous in the car case, we do not have to assume that the car kind is beautiful iff each token of it is. In the mechanic case there is no reasonable assumption about what's in the common ground to make each member of the relevant cloud update equivalent.
- There is recent work showing how contextual goals help determine what is said by sentences in context [7, 1, 2, 3], which suggests even the abstract schema is wrong: conversational goals play a role in determining something like the de facto degree of resolution.

My Proposal

In cases of felicitous nonspecificity, the speaker offloads work from her referential intentions onto other aspects of the context, domain and discourse goals, and the way these goals interact with the context set and minimal meaning of the uttered sentence allows the audience to determine a specific update.

Contextual Goals *Domain goals* are practical objectives mutually accepted by the interlocutors. *Discourse goals* are questions under discussions (QUDs).

Minimal Meaning The *minimal meaning* of a sentence S is context c is the cloud of propositions that are consistent with the context-independent meaning of S, but restricted by the properly manifested referential intentions of the speaker.

Domain Goal Filter The γ-*filtered* minimal meaning of a sentence S in a context c is the cloud of propositions that remains after the propositions non-conducive to the domain goal of c are removed from the minimal meaning of S in c. (If no proposition is conducive, none are eliminated.)

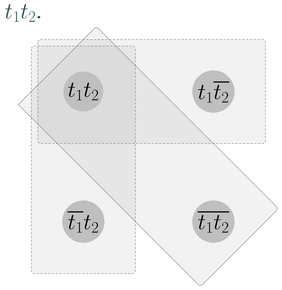
QUD-Sensitive What is Said *What is said* by a sentence S in a context c is the (weakest) answer to the QUD of c that entails each member of the γ-filtered minimal meaning of S in c.

Appropriateness A context c is *appropriate* for a sentence S just in case there is something that is said by S in c.

Treatment of Cases

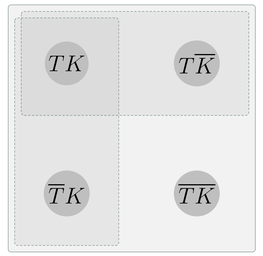
Tablet Case

Common ground: each tablet is not the one ordered iff each other is not.
QUD: Which tablet is not the one ordered?
Domain goal: None relevant.
What is said = t_1t_2.



Car Case

Common ground: No relevant propositions.
QUD: What is a beautiful car?
Domain goal: None relevant.
What is said = TK.



Mechanic Case

The relevant domain goal eliminates all members of the cloud except **I need the hammer now**. This single remaining proposition interacts trivially with the QUD, and is what is said.

Beach Case

There are more constraints on possible answers to the QUD **who is struggling** than properly manifested intentions. So there is no cell of the QUD that entails each member of the cloud.

Further Questions

- Are there cases that show deeper interaction between domain and discourse goal sensitivity?
- How can this model be extended to treat other context-sensitive expressions?

References

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