Clearing up Clouds: Underspecification in Demonstrative Communication

Rory Harder

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Abstract

This paper explains how there can be understanding of an assertion despite there being nothing meant or said by it. That such understanding is possible is revealed by the "felicitous underspecification" of demonstratives, cases in which there is understanding of an assertion containing a demonstrative despite the interlocutors not settling on one or another object as referent (King 2014, 2017). I first argue that Stalnaker's ([1978] 1999) well-known pragmatic principles permit the felicitous underspecification of demonstratives, as well as accurately constrain the phenomenon. I then establish a connection between Stalnaker's principles and understanding, in order to explain how the satisfaction of the principles in cases of felicitous underspecification provides the basis of the understanding present. Finally, I compare the felicitous underspecification had by demonstratives with that of related context-sensitive expressions.

Contents

0 Introduction

This paper is about certain uses of demonstratives—words such as "this" or "that"[1]—of which there is understanding without the interlocutors settling on one or another potential referent. As noticed by Dummett (1973: 74), there can be understanding of "That's a great book" and the contained demonstrative—uttered, for instance, pointing at a copy of Plato's *Republic*—despite the fact that the interlocutors have not settled on either the book type or token as referent of the demonstrative. Interest in this phenomenon has been recently revived by King (2014, 2017), who labels it "felicitous underspecification." Here are some instances of the phenomenon from his work, where the first is an analogue of Dummett's case.

Sports Car At a car dealership, John and Mary stop in front of a row of some new model of sports car. The salesman gets into one and drives up to them. Consumned, John exclaims,

(1) That's a beautiful car!

Intuitively, there can be understanding even if John and Mary do not both fix on either the car type or token.

Package John hears the characteristic, now hourly sound of a delivery truck stopping on his street. He runs out to see his new computer being delivered, in a big brown box. He exclaims to Mary,

(2) It's arrived!

There can be understanding even if John and Mary do not both fix on either the package or its contents.

Tablets John and Mary have ordered from Amazon six tablets of the same make and model. The package arrives and, after opening it and realizing they are all of some other make and model, John mutters,

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

There can be understanding even if John and Mary do not both fix on the tablet kind or any one of the tokens.

Co-Pilots John and Mary are watching an airshow where the planes are co-piloted. Noticing one of the planes start smoking, John says,

[1]The category of demonstratives includes simple ones, such as "this" or "that," used without an accompanying nounphrase complement, as well as complex ones, such as "that rose." For the purposes of this paper, I also include third-person pronouns, such as "he" and "it," in the category of demonstratives.

(4) He's in trouble.

There can be understanding even if John and Mary do not both fix one or the other pilot.

I have given several cases because there might be initial resistance to recognizing genuine felicitous underspecification. It might be tempting to explain this or that case by identifying some particular object that really is the referent. But I propose to take the phenomenon seriously and see if anything sensible can be said about it.

Let me now introduce a few theoretical notions, in order to draw out what I take to be the central puzzle raised by felicitous underspecification, and at the same time point to its resolution. The influential Gricean approach to communication posits certain speaker intentions, which plausibly determine what a speaker means in making an utterance. So I suggest that WHAT IS MEANT by an assertion is a particular, determinate claim given by what the speaker intends to say with it. But there is also what the interlocutors mutually take the speaker to mean to say. So I suggest that WHAT IS SAID by an assertion is a particular, determinate claim given by what it is common ground that the speaker means by their utterance. For preliminary purposes, the COMMON GROUND may be understood as the information mutually assumed by the interlocutors for the purposes of conversation.

What is meant and what is said by an utterance often line up, since it is often that the common ground accurately singles out what the speaker intends to say. But they may also come apart, in the following two ways. First, it may be that the common ground does not entail that there is something in particular that the speaker means, since there might be multiple claims about what the speaker means consistent with what is mutually assumed by the interlocutors: there might be a cloud of propositions that, according to the common ground, the speaker might have meant.[2] Second, and more radically, it may be that the true claim about what the speaker means—if anything at all—is not even consistent with the common ground, since what is mutually assumed for the purposes of conversation need not be consistent with the way things actually are.

Now, in cases of felicitous underspecification, the speaker does not intend to say anything. In Sports Car, for instance, the speaker is not intending to say of either the car type or token that it is beautiful. There is thus nothing that is meant. Furthermore, in such cases neither is it common ground that there is a certain claim that the speaker intends to make. In Sports Car, for instance, the common ground does not settle whether the speaker intends to say of either the car or token that it is beautiful. There is thus nothing that is said. Yet in such cases there is understanding. So the central puzzle of felicitous underspecification is of how there can be understanding while there is nothing that is meant or said.

Moreover, a satisfactory answer to this puzzle must also explain the limits of when such understanding is possible. Consider the following Strawson (1950) inspired case.

[2] I have taken talk of "clouds" of propositions from von Fintel & Gillies (2011) and MacFarlane (2010).

Cluttered Shop John and Mary are in a cluttered shop, surrounded by bric-à-brac. John utters the following, with a vague gesture and no thought about what he means to speak about.

(5) #That's a fine red one.

Here there is nothing meant or said, and also no possibility of understanding.[3]

Cluttered Shop is a case of *in*felicitous underspecification, and the correct account of how there may be understanding without anything meant or said must not predict that there may be understanding in such a case.

Now, here is how the possibility of what is meant and what is said coming apart in the two ways above sheds light on how the puzzle may be fully resolved. In cases of felicitous underspecification, the common ground is consistent with a number of hypotheses about what the speaker meant, and is not consistent with the truth that the speaker meant nothing. Thus, since there are a number of eligible hypotheses, there is also nothing that is said—but it may be that the eligible hypotheses are related in such a way that something determinate can be done on their basis. This proposal is unpacked in what follows. I begin in §1 by showing how Stalnaker's ([1978] 1999) well-known pragmatic principles are satisfied in cases of felicitous underspecification—and also that they rule out cases of infelicitous specification. In §, I elaborate and defend the proposal that there is understanding of an assertion just in case Stalnaker's principles are satisfied.

A couple final points before I begin. First, my treatment of the felicitous underspecification of demonstratives is similar to Bowker's (2019) treatment of a related phenomenon that arises for definite descriptions. Second, King (2014, 2017) argues that the phenomenon of felicitous underspecification arises for many context-sensitive expressions other than demonstratives, for instance definite descriptions.[4] I address both these points in the final §3.

1 Felicitous Underspecification and its Limits

Stalnaker ([1978] 1999) seminally proposed three "essential conditions of rational communication" (88). The principles are constraints on what the common ground of a conversation must be, given an assertion has taken place. As already mentioned, the common ground is the information mutually taken for granted by the interlocutors for the purposes of conversation. Crucially, a common ground determines a CONTEXT SET: the set of maximally specific ways the world might be—i.e. possible worlds—that are consistent with a given common ground.

[3] I use the hashtag "#" in this paper to indicate that the utterance is unsuccessful, or infelicitous, in such a way that prohibits the possibility of understanding.

[4] Issues concerning underspecification for expressions other than demonstratives has been hit upon by many, including Blackburn (1988), Richard (2004), Glanzberg (2009), Buchanan (2010), and von Fintel & Gillies (2011). More recently, Schiller (2019) even provides a case that suggests it arises for proper names.

One of the principles, called "Uniformity," is of central concern in what follows.[5] It holds that any two hypotheses about what the speaker means that are consistent with the context set must lead to the same update on the context set. Here is the principle stated more formally.

Uniformity Given a speaker's utterance, each world w in the context set C must determine a proposition as what the speaker means, in w, and any two such determined propositions P and P' must be UPDATE-EQUIVALENT on C, in that $C \cap P = C \cap P'$.[6]

Uniformity allows there to be indeterminacy in the context set as to what the speaker means, so long as there is a determinate suggestion as to how the context set may be updated—where the determinate suggestion is guaranteed by update-equivalence. Accordingly, Uniformity may be equivalently stated as the requirement that every hypothesis about what the speaker means, consistent with the context set, leads to the same update on the context set. These two statements of Uniformity are equivalent because every one of a set of propositions has the same intersection with a given context set just in case every pair of propositions in the set of propositions is update-equivalent on that context set. So, for simplicity, I will speak of sets of propositions being update-equivalent (on context sets).

The cases of felicitous underspecification from the introduction satisfy Uniformity. In Sports Car, the speaker, John, has done enough, but only enough, to help make it common ground that he is either saying that the car kind is beautiful, or that the car token of that kind, in front of them, is beautiful. But it is a manifestly plausible mutual assumption that a kind is beautiful just in case its instances are. See figure 1 for an illustration of how Uniformity holds in Sports Car. In Package, the common ground has it that John is either saying that the package arrived, or its contents. But it is a reasonable joint assumption that a package arrives just in case its contents do. In Tablets, the common ground does not settle whether it is this or that particular tablet that John is speaking of, or even the kind, when he says that it is not the one he ordered. But it is plausibly part of the common ground that all the tablet tokens are of the same kind. Thus, one of the tablets is of the wrong kind just in case the others are, as well as the kind itself. In Co-Pilots, the common ground holds that John may be saying either that one co-pilot or the other is in trouble. But it is a plausible assumption that, when a plane is threatening to go down, one of the co-pilots is in trouble just in case the other is.

Now here are the two other principles Stalnaker proposes, in addition to Uniformity.

[5]The terminology of "Uniformity" is from Hawthorne & Magidor (2009), but note that the principle I am endorsing here corresponds to what they call "Weak Uniformity," as it involves a qualification that Stalnaker ([1978] 1999) mentions in footnote 13. I note also that Hawthorne & Magidor criticize this principle and its motivation, but for responses see Stalnaker (2009), Almotahari & Glick (2010), and Kirk-Giannini (2018).

[6]Here is a brief explanation of the standard notation and terminology I here employ. The variables "w," "w',"…range over maximally specific ways that the world might be, i.e. possible worlds. The variables "P," "P'," …and other capital letters range over less specific ways that the world might be, i.e. sets of possible worlds. I talk of sets of possible worlds as propositions, but for purposes of this paper I need only assume that a proposition, strictly speaking, determines a set of possible worlds. Finally, I use the standard set-theoretic operation of intersection, denoted by "∩," which takes two propositions and determines what they have in common: $P \cap P'$ is the set of worlds that are in both P and P'.

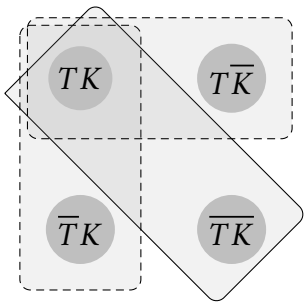

Figure 1: The solid rectangle represents the common ground. The dotted rectangles represent the different claims the speaker could be making. T represents the worlds where the car token is beautiful ($\overline{T}$ where it is not), and K the worlds where the car kind is.

Informativeness Given a speaker's utterance, each world w in the context set C must determine a proposition as what the speaker intends to say, in w, and any such determined proposition is true in some but not all worlds of C.

Contentfulness Given a speaker's utterance, each world w in the context set C must determine a proposition as what the speaker intends to say, in w, and any such determined proposition must have a truth-value in all worlds of C.

All together, the three principles guarantee that, given an assertion, the context set itself determines that there is a single way of updating that same context set (Uniformity), where that update is a genuine reduction of the context set (Informativeness), and where it is clear, for each world in the context, whether it survives that reduction or not (Contentfulness).[7]

It should be apparent that the two principles other than Uniformity are also satisfied in the cases under discussion. In each of the cases, any proposition the speaker could be intending to say, given the context set, is one that is plausibly not already taken for granted by the interlocutors. So Informativeness is satisfied. And in each of the cases no proposition the speaker could be intending to say, given the context set, is one that plausibly has truth-value gaps. So Contentfulness is satisfied.

Based on the cases under discussion, I propose generally that in cases of felicitous underspecification Stalnaker's three principles are satisfied. And here is a general explanation of how the principles may be satisfied despite there being nothing that is meant or said. First, the three principles may be satisfied when there is nothing that is meant because they do not require that the

[7]Following Stalnaker ([1978] 1999: 89–90), my talk here of there being a *clear* way of updating the context set is meant to recapitulate Contentfulness. Given Contentfulness, it must not only be that each of the propositions that could be meant are true in the same worlds of the context set—and thus provide a determinate update—but it must also be that none of the propositions that could be meant lack a truth-value in any world of the context set. If one of the propositions did lack a truth-value in a world of the context set, then the question arises of whether that world really should not survive the update, since the world does not make the proposition false. Hence, it would not be clear whether that world should survive the update or not. I wish to note, however, that the considerations that follow in this paper do not crucially upon Contentfulness in the way that they rely upon the other two principles; hence, it is fine if Contentfulness cannot be ultimately motivated.

common ground be consistent with the truth about what the speaker meant. In general, there should be no requirement that the common ground reflect the truth: it is possible that what the interlocutors take for granted, for the purposes of conversation, does not reflect how things actually are. Hence, the truth that the speaker means nothing need not be reflected in the common ground. Second, here is how the principles may be satisfied despite there being nothing that is said. The key principle, Uniformity, explicitly allows the common ground to be consistent with multiple hypotheses about what the speaker means, as long as there is update-equivalence among the eligible hypotheses—so it would be strange for any further principle to disallow the possibility of multiple hypotheses. The other two principles explicitly also allow there to be multiple eligible hypotheses about what is meant, as long as each is true in some but not all worlds of the context set (Informativeness) and false in all the others (Contentfulness). Thus, it should be clear that, even if there are further implicit principles, not laid out by Stalnaker ([1978] 1999), they should nonetheless not rule out cases in which nothing is meant or said.

We have thus made an initial step in resolving the puzzle of how there may be understanding in cases where there is nothing meant or said. But, as suggested in the introduction, we should also seek to explain the limits of when such understanding is possible. So, in the remainder of this section, I argue that the principles are not satisfied in cases of *in*felicitous underspecification.

In Cluttered Shop, from the introduction, it is not a reasonable joint assumption that one of the red things in the shop is fine just in case all the other ones are. Thus, my focus remains on the principle Uniformity, which, again, requires that the every hypothesis about what the speaker means *that is consistent with the context set* leads to the same update *on the context set*. As I am about to show, Uniformity places a substantial general limit on the possibility of felicitous underspecification, given the way that the principle does not allow aspects of conversational context other than common ground to help make underspecification felicitous.

King (2017) proposes to account for felicitous underspecification by suggesting that contextual goals play a role in mitigating underspecification. His discussion is brief and his proposal highly schematic, but we may refine his appeal to contextual goals by looking to Roberts's influential identification of discourse and domain goals (Roberts 2005, 2012a,b). Discourse goals provide the topics of conversations, playing a core role in conversation's function of enabling joint enquiry. Roberts takes discourse goals to be questions under discussion (QUDs). Accordingly, each context has a QUD, which can be either implicit or given explicitly. A QUD—for instance, what is John's favourite cheese?—structures the joint inquiry endemic to conversation. On the other hand, Domain goals are practical interests of interlocutors, which they have agreed to work together to satisfy through their conversation. They are particular things that individuals want out of the world—our "domain." They also are either implicit or explicit. Suppose, for instance, that John is lost in a foreign city and needs to find the train station, so strikes up a conversation with a stranger. More examples of both of these kinds of goals are given below, alongside pertinent data.

Appealing to either domain or discourse goals, however, overgenerates felicitous underspecification; underspecific cases are in fact more constrained in their felicity than they would be if

contextual goals played a role. Consider first domain goals, with the following case.

Hammer A mechanic and his assistant are working together to repair a car. The mechanic gestures vaguely at his table of tools, without looking, and says to his assistant,

(6) #I need that tool now.

This utterance is infelicitous, even if the mechanic is at a stage in the repair such that a certain hammer is required.

The mechanic's vague demonstration makes it compatible with the common ground that he may be intending to speak about one or the other of several tools on the table. Given, however, the mechanic and assistant's coordination on their practical goal, there is a specific tool on the table such that the mechanic needing it is uniquely conducive to that goal. So it seems that domain goals could play a role in narrowing down the hypotheses about what the speaker is intending to say, in this case to a single one. Yet the utterance in Hammer is infelicitous.[8] And Uniformity is violated: the different hypotheses suggested by the demonstration—that the mechanic needs this or that tool on the table—are not update-equivalent, since it is not a plausible common assumption that the mechanic needs one tool just in case he needs another. Thus, domain goals do not play a role in narrowing down the potential hypotheses about what the speaker is intending to say. See figure 2 for an illustration of how update-equivalence is not satisfied in this case.

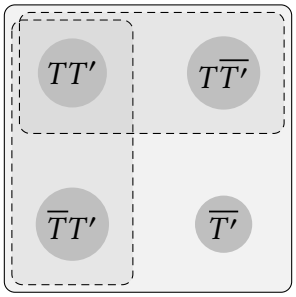

Figure 2: T represents worlds where one certain tool is needed by the mechanic, and T' represents worlds where another is. For this diagram, I have assumed, for simplicity, there are only two relevant tools.

Taking a step back, it is theoretically unclear why domain goals should even be expected to aid with felicity. They are simply interests the interlocutors happen to have, and thus not integral

[8] A very similar case to Hammer is one where it is common ground that the mechanic needs a certain hammer at the point in the repair that he is at. In such a case, it is plausible that it also common ground that the mechanic intends to say that he needs that hammer now with (6). My proposal holds that in such a case there is felicity, and I think that lines up with intuition. Moreover, it is also consistent with my proposal that in such a case the domain goals operate in virtue of how they influence the common ground. The claim I am making in this paragraph, on the basis of Hammer, is that domain goals do not by themselves allow for felicitous underspecification by narrowing down the relevant hypotheses about what the speaker means.

to conversation as such. QUDs, on the other hand, as discourse goals do have a more intimate connection to the nature of conversation. Hence, it is more plausible that they may help refine King's appeal to contextual goals. Yet Dickie (2020) shows, with the following cases, that QUDs do not play this role.

Good Student John and Mary are professors, and Mary visits John's graduate seminar. John has previously mentioned to her that even one good student can make a seminar worthwhile, to which she has expressed agreement. The seminar that Mary visits ends up going terribly, with much awkward silence and off topic comments. As the students are leaving, Mary asks John whether this seminar, on the whole, is worthwhile. In response, he gestures towards the corner of the seminar table, where several students sat taking notes the whole time. He utters,

(7) #She's a really good student—it's a pity she didn't say anything.

The relevant QUD here is explicit: is this seminar worthwhile? John's answer, despite the fact that it is underspecific, provides a clear answer to that question (Yes). Yet the utterance is infelicitous.

Miser John is complaining to Mary that food has become so expensive since the recession. She responds by accusing John of being a "misery guts" who's always thought everything is overpriced. John retorts as follows, while gesturing towards a shelf behind Mary, which contains dozens of knickknacs, but withdrawing his arm quickly before she turns to look:

(8) Nonsense! #I think that's cheap.

The relevant QUD here, though implicit, is plausibly whether John thinks anything cheap. And the utterance, despite the fact that it is underspecific, provides a clear answer to that question (No). Yet there is infelicity.[9]

In both these cases, Uniformity is violated. In Good Student, John could be speaking of one or the other student, according to the common ground. But it is not a plausible joint assumption that one student is good just in case the other is. In Miser, John could be speaking about one or another kickknack, according to the common ground. But it is not a plausible joint assumption that one knickknack is cheap just in case another is. It must be said, however, that Dickie takes her cases to do something very different than provide support for Uniformity—a point to which I return in the next section.

[9]I have modified the case slightly from how Dickie originally presents it in order to make the utterance more directly responsive to the question under discussion. With my modification, infelicity intuitively remains.

2 Understanding and the Commonplace Effect

Recall my suggestion, from the introduction, that cases of felicitous underspecification raise the puzzle of how there can be understanding without anything meant or said. I also suggested there that fully resolving that puzzle involves accounting for the limits of felicitous underspecification. As a first step in resolving the puzzle, I showed in the previous section that the satisfaction of Stalnaker's principles is both sufficient and necessary for felicitous underspecification. In this section, I explain how it is that the satisfaction of Stalnaker's principles goes hand in hand with understanding.

Consider how Stalnaker provides background motivation for his principles. He begins by distinguishing two ways in which an assertion may influence the common ground.

> How does an assertion change the context? There are two ways, the second of which, I will suggest, should be an essential component of the analysis of assertion. I will mention the first just to set it apart from the second: The fact that a speaker is speaking, saying the words he is saying in the way he is saying them, is a fact that is usually accessible to everyone present. Such observed facts can be expected to the change the presumed common background knowledge of the speaker and his audience in the same way that any obviously observable change in the physical surroundings of the conversation will change the presumed common knowledge. (86)

This first, "commonplace" effect—as he later calls it on the same page—is the effect an assertion has on the common ground in virtue of it being a mutually observed event. The addressee, for instance, need not accept the assertion in order for the commonplace effect to take place. Stalnaker, however, sets aside the commonplace effect, and focuses instead on what he calls the "essential" effect of an assertion.

> Once the context is adjusted to accommodate the [commonplace effect], how does the CONTENT of an assertion alter the context? My suggestion is a very simple one: To make an assertion is to reduce the context set in a particular way, provided that there are no objections from the other participants in the conversation. The particular way in which the context set is reduced is that all of the possible situations incompatible with what is said are eliminated. To put it a slightly different way, the essential effect of an assertion is to change the presuppositions of the participants in the conversation by adding the content of what is asserted to what is presupposed. This effect is avoided only if the assertion is rejected. (86, emphasis in original)

In this latter passage, we find the traditional Stalnakerian view about the essential effect of assertion, that assertion is fundamentally about sharing pieces of information about the world.

Now let me return to Dickie's cases, Good Student and Miser, in order to wrap up a loose end from the previous section, and at the same time point the way to the connection between

understanding and Stalnaker's principles. Dickie takes her cases to show that the traditional Stalnakerian view about assertion is incorrect. Her criticism is broadly as follows. Given that traditional view, the possibility of felicitous underspecification is mysterious, since in such cases there is not a determinate piece of information shared by the speaker. So, she argues, such a proposal is naturally elaborated—broadly as King does—by appeal to QUDs: assertion is about sharing information determinate enough given our discourse goals. But, as her cases show, this natural elaboration overgenerates felicity.

Here is some justification for the claim, in Dickie's criticism, that felicitous underspecification challenges the traditional Stalnakerian view of that assertion is fundamentally about sharing pieces of information about the world. Recall my suggestions, from the introduction, that what is meant is the claim that the speaker intends to say, and what is said is what the speaker intends to say according to the common ground. Now, the piece of information to be shared, according to the traditional view, should be identified with either what is meant or what is said.[10] But, in cases of cases of felicitous underspecification, there are perfectly successful assertions without there being anything that is meant or said. And something that need not hold in a perfectly successful assertion cannot be the essential effect of assertion. Therefore, the traditional Stalnakerian view is incorrect. I do note that the essential effect is what takes place when an assertion is accepted by an addressee, so there is a way in which an assertion may be successful without the essential effect holding: when the assertion is understood but not accepted by an addressee. But, in cases of felicitous underspecification, it may be that the assertion is understood *and* accepted by the addressee, yet, again, without there being a piece of information that the speaker is sharing.

On the basis of her criticism, Dickie—and Szabó (2020) following in her stead—outline alternative pragmatic views. Their proposals are promising, but I do not dwell on them here. Dickie

[10]I note that there are other pieces of information that the Stalnakerian might identify as the one that it is the essential effect of assertion to share, and which are present in cases of felicitous underspecification. First, it might be that the essential effect of assertion is to share the context-*in*sensitive diagonal proposition associated with an utterance. The notion of the diagonal proposition associated with an utterance was introduced in Stalnaker [1978] 1999, and can be specified without any commitment to a determinate way that context-sensitive expressions are to be resolved. So, for instance, the diagonal of an utterance of "That man is happy" is the proposition *whoever is being demonstrated is happy* restricted the context set, where the context set may be compatible with various specific objects as what is being demonstrated. But here are three problems for the claim that the essential effect of assertion is to share this diagonal propositon: (a) the essential effect of assertion would then be to share a piece of information that entails everything that happens to be assumed by the interlocutors so far in their conversation, which is odd, to say the least (see Kirk-Giannini (2020) for more a more thorough argument to a similar effect); (b) the issue then arises of why it is interlocutors ever care about resolving the reference of context-sensitive expressions—more specifically, in terms of the present discussion, such a proposal seems to overgenerate felicitous underspecification; and (c) according to Stalnaker [1978] 1999 diagonalization is supposed to kick in when his principles are violated, but in cases of felicitous underspecification his principles are not violated.

In more recent work Stalnaker (2014) discusses the *super*diagonal proposition associated with an utterance, which is the diagonal not restricted to the context set. But, if it is claimed that the essential effect of an assertion is to share the superdiagonal, the issues identified in (b) and (c) above for the regular diagonal still apply. Thus, appealing to diagonals is off the table in attempting to save Stalnaker's traditional view of assertion in light of felicitous underspecification.

Finally, it might held that the essential piece of information is that unique update on the context set, which the potentially multiple candidates for what is meant lead to when Stalnaker's three principles are satisfied. But this proposal faces a similar to problem (a) raised above for the diagonal proposal, since this proposed piece of information entails the context set.

is correct that felicitous underspecification poses a challenge to the traditional Stalnakerian view that assertion is fundamentally about sharing pieces of information. Yet, as the previous section should have made clear, the phenomenon supports Stalnaker's principles. Thus, I turn now to finding an alternative basis for Stalnaker's principles.

In doing so, I set aside the issue of what the nature of the essential effect is—though recall that the essential effect of an assertion is what takes place when the assertion is accepted by the addressee. I focus instead on the commonplace effect, which, recall, is the effect an assertion has on the common ground, preceding the essential effect. Stalnaker sets aside the commonplace effect in the course of motivating his principles, but that he does so is misleading. His principles are in fact constraints on what the commonplace effect of an assertion must bring about. The principles state requirements that the context set must satisfy, given that an assertion has taken place—which is to say *given that the context set has been influenced by the commonplace effect of that assertion*. Together, the principles require that the commonplace effect of an assertion bring it about that the context set is consistent with only update-equivalent hypotheses about what the speaker meant (Uniformity), where the determinate update these hypotheses genuinely reduces the context set (Informativeness), and where none of the hypotheses lacks a truth-value in any of the worlds of the context set (Contentfulness).

So if the commonplace effect of an assertion satisfies the three principles, then there is a clear way to update the context set on the basis of that assertion. Thus, since the principles together require that the commonplace effect brings it about that there is a clear way to update the context set, the commonplace effect is supposed to provide the rational basis for what is to happen if the assertion is accepted. But the notion of understanding an assertion corresponds precisely to that which provides the rational basis for its acceptance. Therefore, the principles are requirements upon understanding. As mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, Stalnaker describes his principles as "essential conditions of rational communication." In contrast, the present considerations reveal that the principles are conditions in an account of understanding. But that is not to deny that the principles are normative in any sense, for understanding is a normative notion: it is something that can be gotten right or wrong, and it is what the provides the *rational* basis for an assertion's acceptance.

Thus, I propose the following connection between the principles and understanding.

Understanding and Stalnaker's Principles There is understanding of an assertion just in case the commonplace effect of that assertion brings it about that the context set satisfies the three Stalnakerian principles.

There is much more that could be said in support of this connection between understanding and the Stalnaker's principles. I do not go into much detail here, for considerations of space. To conclude this section, though, I say a bit about a conception of understanding that supports Understanding and Stalnaker's Principles.

Recall again the notions of what is meant and what is said: what the speaker intends to say and what the common ground entails that the speaker intends to say. These notions stand at opposite extremes on a scale of sociality. What is meant is something private, in that it is determined by the speaker's mental states. But what the speaker has said is fully public in such a way that the speaker is on the hook for having said what they said; that the speaker said what they said can transcend the particular interaction between the speaker and addressee, as the addressee can take it from their interaction with the speaker and share it with others (Camp 2018).[11] So what is said is social, in a large-scale, collective sense of "social." I propose, in contrast, that understanding is neither private nor social. It is a joint interaction between interlocutors. So it is not entirely up to the speaker, and thus not private. But it is merely a small-scale, interpersonal interaction, and thus need not give rise to anything public.

What I propose, furthermore, drawing upon the Gricean tradition, is that understanding crucially involves the interlocutors making sense of one another, as fellow intentional agents, in virtue of their actions. So I claim that there is understanding of an assertion just in case the goal of making sense of one another has been enabled on the basis of that assertion. So far in this paper the common ground has been characterized as the information mutually taken for granted by the interlocutors for the purposes of conversation. But now more can be said in refinement of this characterization. I propose that the common ground is the background information drawn upon by interlocutors in the joint activity of finding mutual intelligibility. Thus, if the common ground is updated, then the project of achieving mutual intelligibility has been served, since there is thereby more information that the interlocutors may rely upon in doing so. Therefore, *if there is a clear way of updating the context set on the basis of the commonplace effect of an assertion, then there is a clear way of contributing to the joint activity of making sense of one another on the basis that assertion.* Moreover, I propose that the common ground exhausts the resources that interlocutors have in making sense of one another: since in conversation interlocutors are jointly engaged in achieving mutual intelligibility, the information drawn upon in making sense of one another must be information mutually taken for granted. Therefore, *there being a clear way of contributing to the joint activity of making sense of one another on the basis an assertion requires that there be a clear way of updating the context set on the basis of the commonplace effect of an assertion.*

Given the two claims emphasized in the previous paragraph, it follows that the goal of making

[11] My account of what is said plausibly explains how what is said is out in the open in that way, since my account holds that what is said is the particular, determinate claim that the common ground entails that the speaker meant to say. But I note that Camp (2018) suggests that characterizing what is said requires appealing to more than just common ground. She argues that cases of insinuation can be such that it is common ground that the speaker has made the relevant claim, yet it is not thereby the case that the speaker has said it, in the relevant sense, since the speaker is merely insinuating. So, she suggests that, in order for something to be truly said, it must go on what she calls the "conversational scoreboard." For the purposes of this paper, it is open to me to accept Camp's suggestions, since one may appeal to the conversational scoreboard but still hold that something is said *only if* it is common ground that the speaker means to say it. But I suspect, following Bach & Harnish (1979), that in cases of insinuation it is not the case that it is common ground that the speaker has made the relevant claim, and I do not think that Camp's argument to the contrary is decisive—see page 55 of Camp 2018 for the argument. I would thus like to leave open the possibility that appeal to a conversational scoreboard is not needed in order to characterize what said; nonetheless, if Camp is right, that only strengthens the present proposal that what is said is social in a sense that understanding is not.

sense of one another has been enabled on the basis of an assertion just in case there is a clear way of updating the context set on the basis of the commonplace effect of an assertion. Thus, given also the claim from the beginning of the previous paragraph—the one connecting understanding and the goal of making sense of one another—the connection I proposed in Understanding and Stalnaker's Principles follows. So I have provided motivation for my proposed connection between understanding and Stalnaker's principles. In terms now of the puzzle raised by felicitous underspecification, all that is required for understanding is that the interlocutors' joint project of making sense of one another is served on the basis of the assertion, for which it is sufficient that there be some determinate way of updating the information that is drawn in that joint project. And this is how there may be understanding without anything meant or said.

3 Nondemonstrative Underspecificity

In this section, I discuss the felicitous underspecification had by expressions other than demonstratives. The reason for this discussion is two-fold. First, King (2017) suggests that the felicitous underspecification had by demonstratives is the same as that had by many other expressions. Thus, in response, I wish to justify the present paper's focus on demonstratives. Second, Bowker (2019) presents a solution to the so-called "problem of incomplete descriptions"—an old problem, which goes back to Strawson (1950)—and Bowker's solution is similar to my proposal from the previous sections regarding the puzzle raised by the felicitous underspecification of demonstratives. So I wish to discuss the relationship between our proposals.

The problem of incomplete descriptions pertains to definite descriptions: phrases such as "the man." The problem may be introduced with the following case from Buchanan & Ostertag (2005).[12]

Famous Professor John and Mary are waiting for a public lecture to begin by a divisive philosopher. They have never seen the philosoher before, but have a stock of relevant shared information: he is the author of a book called "Smells and Tickles", he is the only living philosopher to have claimed to have a solution to the mind-body problem, etc. The professor is late, as usual, but the crowd becomes shocked as a rumour spreads that he has been spotted at the bar down the street. John overhears the people next to him whispering, and says to Mary,

(9) The professor is drunk.

Here is a successful use of a definite description, where there may be understanding.

[12]A case similar to Famous Professor is given by Schiffer (1995), but here I follow the adaptation of Buchanan & Ostertag (2005), since it avoids the possibility of appealing, as Schiffer does, to the point that the definite description is being used referentially as opposed to attributively (for the distinction between referential and attributive definite descriptions, see Donnellan (1966)).

On a naive Russellian treatment of definite descriptions, (9) expresses the proposition that there is a unique professor and that professor is drunk (Russell 1905). On a simple Fregean treatment, (9) presupposes that there is a unique professor, and, if that presupposition is met, expresses the proposition that that professor is drunk (Strawson 1950). Both these first-pass treatments predict that (9) implicates in some way that there is a unique professor (in all of existence), yet that implication is false and plausibly known to be so by the interlocutors. So both accounts incorrectly predict that (9) is infelicitous.

The standard way of preserving these approaches in light of this issue is by appeal to implicit domain restriction (Stanley & Szabó 2000). A simple way of capturing implicit domain restriction involves positing a covert variable inside the definite description's logical form, as follows.

(10) [the [professor f]]

The variable f is assigned a property by a contextually given assignment function, which composes by intersection with the property of professorhood.[13] Now, considering for simplicity the Russellianism treatment, (9) expresses the proposition that there is a unique professor *with the property assigned to the covert variable*, and who, in addition, is drunk. So, with implicit domain restriction, the proposition expressed by (9) may be, for instance, that there is unique professor *who John and Mary are waiting to see*, who is drunk.

Here is where the problem of incomplete descriptions arises. There are a number of possible properties that may be assigned to the covert variable in cases such as Famous Professor, each leading to distinct overall propositions. So which proposition is expressed? How is there successful communication? These questions represent the problem of incomplete descriptions.

Recent commentators on this problem have settled upon the following related answers to those questions (Blackburn 1988, Buchanan & Ostertag 2005, Buchanan 2010). First, a use of a definite description as in Famous Professor helps express a range of propositions, where each is generated from some reasonable way of filling in the implicit domain restriction. Second, successful communication is then constituted by the addressee grasping one or another member of that cloud of propositions. Now what Bowker adds to the solution provided by these answers is based on the observation that the list of reasonable potential completions of the implicit domain restriction in cases such as Famous Professor constitutes a group of propositions that is update-equivalent. Consider each of the following.

(11) a. The professor *we are waiting to see* is drunk.
b. The professor *who authored "Smells and Tickles"* is drunk.
c. The professor *who claimed to solve the mind-body problem* is drunk.

Bowker assumes that the following claim is part of the common ground in Famour Professor.

[13]The simplification I am making is that, instead of a single variable assigned a property, there should be two variables, one assigned an individual and one assigned a relation—which compose to determine a property—in order to make sense of bound definite descriptions. But that complication is not relevant for current purposes.

(12) There is unique professor we are waiting to see if and only if there is a unique professor who authored "Smells and Tickes" if and only if there is a unique professor who claimed to solve the mind-body problem.

Granting Bowker's assumption, it follows that the propositions expressed by the sentences in (11) are update-equivalent. Accordingly, Bowker proposes that, in a case such as this where the propositions determined by every reasonable completion of the implicit domain restriction of a definite descriptions are update-equivalent, the audience may thereby grasp every proposition in the cloud, not just one or another of them, in virtue of grasping the update to which each member of the clouds leads.

Here are two initials points in comparing Bowker's proposal to what I have said in the previous sections about demonstrative underspecification. First, Bowker does not claim that the reasonable completions of a definite description's implicit domain restriction are determined by what the common ground entails that the speaker meant. He only claims that an utterance of a definite description "leaves open a number of completing properties" for its implicit domain restriction, and this notion of leaving-open is left unanalyzed (4244). Second, and more importantly, the basis of which completions are left open should not be identified with that which determines potential referents for a demonstratives, for it is not the case that definite descriptions require that their set of potential completions leads to a set of update-equivalent propositions in order for there to be understanding. Bowker (2019: 4244) even acknowledges as much, since he claims that cases in which the potential completions do not lead to an update-equivalent set of propositions are ones where the addressee still may understand the utterance, albeit by merely grasping one or another of the propositions in the cloud. In order to motivate how it is that the underspecification of definite descriptions differs from that of demonstratives, let me turn to discussing King's work on felicitous underspecification in a bit more detail.

Taking a brief step back, the felicitous underspecification of demonstratives seems exceptional; specificity of reference for demonstratives seems the norm. But definite descriptions seem to be a member of a group of expressions for which underspecification is the rule rather than the exception. Some other expressions in this latter group are universal quantifiers, modals, and gradable adjectives. King, however, discusses the felicitous underspecification of all these other expressions (and more) alongside demonstratives. He labels this entire group of expressions, including demonstratives, "supplementives," since they are context-sensitive and such that the resolution of their context-sensitivity involves special supplementation from context. (Compare, for instance, how a use of the first-person pronoun "I," not a supplementive according to King, seems to simply pick out the speaker.) King holds that all supplementives have the same mechanism governing their context-sensitivity. So, despite the fact that he notes that felicitous underspecification is less typical for demonstratives than for other supplementives, he nonetheless suggests that the phenomenon is essentially the same among all supplementives.

But in this paper I have focused only on demonstratives, and there is reason to think that what

is occurring with demonstratives in underspecification is importantly different from what occurs with other supplementives. Consider, for instance, a simple use of a gradable adjective.

(13) John is rich.

On the standard semantic story, context must supply a degree of wealth, and (13) says John's wealth exceeds that degree (Kennedy 2007). Yet it is implausible that felicitous use of such a sentence requires that context supply one particular threshold. Moreover, in cases of felicitous underspecification for gradable adjectives, there is the intuitive feeling that a disjunctive claim is being proposed: in (13), it is that John's wealth exceeds *some*—one or another—appropriate threshold. But that disjunctive effect is different than what the account in this paper holds for demonstratives, which is that their felicitous yet underspecific uses bring about update on the conjunction of the possible interpretations.[14]

A similar disjunctive effect has been claimed for modals (von Fintel & Gillies 2011), but also, as already mentioned, for definite descriptions. The way that these authors unpack the disjunctive effect is that the addressee may understand the utterance by only grasping one or another of the potential determinate propositions expressed, and that the speaker is able to fall back on any one of the potential propositions, if pushed by the addressee. But this potential retreat to any of the resolutions differs from what intuitively holds for demonstrative underspecification: the speaker may not protest if the addressee focuses on one or another of the potential referents. In Sports Car, for instance, the addresse could reasonably disagree by either denying that the car token or the kind is beautiful. Consider each of the following responses to (1), "That's a beautiful car."

(14) a. No, don't you see giant scratch on the passenger's side door?
b. No, I've hated its gaudy Italian design since I saw that first commercial.

King (2017: 16) makes a similar observation, and notes that with either type of response the speaker would not feel as if the addressee has changed the topic. He uses this observation to motivate the claim that there is genuine felicitous underspecification in Sports Car. What I wish to emphasize here is that the speaker may not, in response to either (14-a) or (14-b), avoid the criticism, by claiming, for instance, that they really had the other thing (type or token) in mind.

The contrast between what I have called the "disjunctive effect" of definite descriptions (and many other expressions other than demonstratives) and this paper's proposal concerning demonstratives demands further elaboration. I do not provide it here, though see this footnote[15] for an

[14]If update-equivalence holds among a set of propositions S and a context C, then the determinate update that all of S bring about on C is the same as the effect of updating C with the conjunction—or, strictly speaking, the intersection—of all members of S.

[15]One way of making sense of how an utterance containing, for instance, a gradable adjective expresses a disjunctive claim regarding thresholds is that what is meant by the assertion is the superdiagonal proposition with regard to the threshold—see footnote 10 of the previous section for a discussion of diagonal propositions and their relationship to the underspecification of demonstratives. The superdiagonal proposition is determined by the conventional meaning of the uttered sentence, thus it can also easily become common ground that a speaker has meant the superdiagonal. Assume in addition that a given common ground will likely be opinionated about what the correct

outline of a proposal. What I emphasize is that this contrast throws doubt upon King's claim that all supplementatives have the same mechanisms governing their context-sensitivity, in a way that justifies my focus on demonstratives. And, with regard to Bowker, for underspecific yet felicitous cases of definite descriptions, the disjunctive effect suggests that the range of completions for their implicit domain restriction is not based on what the speaker meant according to the common ground, and is accordingly not required to satisfy Uniformity.

4 Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to account for the understanding present with uses of demonstratives that are felicitous yet underspecific, despite the fact that in such cases there is nothing meant or said—and to also explain the limits of such understanding. I began, in §1, by showing how three principles proposed by Stalnaker—Uniformity, Informativeness, and Contentfulness—are satisfied in cases of felicitous underspecification—but also rule out cases of infelicitous underspecification. Next, in §2, I elaborated the connection between understanding and Stalnaker's principles, and suggested that such a connection is motivated by a broadly Gricean proposal concerning the connection between understanding and the joint activity of making sense of one another, as well as a refined conception of common ground. Finally, I discussed in §3 the difference between the felicitous underspecification of demonstratives and that of other expressions.

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thresholds of, for instance, tallness are. Thus, if what is said is accepted, the update will be the same as the update on the diagonal. In sum, the proposal here is that an assertion of "John is tall" means that there is some threshold of tallness that John exceeds, and if that proposition is accepted the update is that John exceeds some contextually appropriate threshold of tallness. And I note that I have presented these propositions as existentially quantified, but they can equivalently be present as disjunctive, that John exceeds at least one or another threshold. For a worked out proposal along these lines, though in a dynamic framework, see Barker (2002). I stress, finally, that I intend my proposal here regarding gradable adjectives to extend to all supplementives other than demonstratives.

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