Nonuniqueness implications in demonstrative descriptions*

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1 Introduction

Demonstrative descriptions are incompatible with descriptive content that necessarily denotes a singleton set (semantically unique content: Löbner 1985).

(1) a. *that center of the universe
b. the center of the universe
(2) a. *that mother of John
b. the mother of John
(3) a. *that smallest prime number
b. the smallest prime number

Demonstratives are compatible with contextually unique content, as shown below:

(4) this lectern
(5) that ceiling

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• Preview of the talk
  – The nonuniqueness effect is independent of contrastive focus.
  – In special circumstances, demonstrative determiners are compatible with semantically unique content.
  – The nonuniqueness effect is a conversational implicature arising due to interaction with definite descriptions.
  – Similar to Hawkins’s (1991) proposal about indefinite descriptions, but not a scalar implicature.

2 A red herring: contrastive focus

A tempting direction: nonuniqueness as an effect of contrastive focus on a demonstrative determiner.

• Contrastive focus evokes a set of alternatives.
• When a demonstrative determiner is focused, the relevant alternatives are individuals satisfying the descriptive content (see ex. (6) below).
• In order for an appropriate alternative set to be available when a demonstrative determiner is focused, there must be more than one individual satisfying the descriptive content.

(6) [In a hat shop]
   a. I like THAT hat, but not THAT hat.
   b. ?? I like that HAT.

But even nonfocused, destressed demonstrative descriptions display nonuniqueness effects, as shown below:

(7) *The first chapter of the astronomy textbook discussed the center of the universe and the appendix CALCULATED that center of the universe.

Conclusion: The nonuniqueness condition on demonstrative descriptions is independent of the effects of contrastive focus.

3 Semantically unique demonstratives

• In some special circumstances, demonstrative descriptions are compatible with semantically unique content.
3.1 Lakoff’s (1974) “emotional deixis”
(8) That John Smith is a really great guy!
(9) That John Smith is a jerk!
(10) How is that nose of yours?

- Conveys a sense of solidarity between discourse participants
- Discourse participants share opinion of referent of demonstrative

3.2 Demonstrative descriptions with postnominal modifiers
(11) That prime number which is smallest is of interest to mathematicians.
(12) Every girl, read that book which interested her, the most.

Exceptional features of this construction, as discussed by King (2001) and Wolter (2004):
- No demonstration, no anaphora
- Not scopally inert
- “Attributive” feel (see Donnellan (1966))

3.3 Analytical options
- A possible approach (to be rejected): lexical ambiguity
  - Stipulation: the demonstrative determiners in the special constructions above lack a nonuniqueness condition.
- Lexical ambiguity is not necessary in order to account for the nonuniqueness effect.
- A unified approach to demonstrative determiners leads to a better understanding of why the nonuniqueness condition applies or does not apply.

4 Overview of the English definite system

Some conventional wisdom:

- Definite DPs as referential expressions
  - See, among many others, Strawson (1950); Löbner (1985); Heim (1982); Recanati (2004).
- Referring expressions are acceptable just in case a unique referent may be established in the (local linguistic) context.
  - Recent uniqueness-based approaches to definiteness include Kadmon (1987); Heim (1992); Lyons (1999); Farkas (2002); Roberts (2003).
- The referent of a definite or demonstrative description is identified in part on the basis of descriptive content.
- In the DRT/file change semantics tradition, determiners also place conditions on the variables they introduce (Kamp 1981; Heim 1982; Farkas 2002, 2005).

4.1 Markedness in the English definite system

In the English definite determiner system, we find a scale of increasingly stringent conditions1:

(13) the: uniqueness
(14) that: uniqueness + referent identified by demonstration
(15) this: uniqueness + referent identified by demonstration + proximity

The conditions can be formalized as presupposition-bearing privative features (Schlenker 2003; Farkas 2002, 2005; Cowper and Hall 2002).

(16) \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{the} \\
\text{[demonstration]}
\end{array}
\]

1See Gundel et al. (1993) for a scale in the same spirit, but involving constraints on levels of givenness.
Evidence for the conditions summarized in (13–15):

- Definite descriptions are acceptable when a unique referent is identifiable on the basis of the description and the previously established context.
  - Semantically unique content
    (17) An astronomer located the center of the universe.
  - Contextually unique referent
    (18) I’m wearing the microphone.
  - Anaphoric definite description with unique potential antecedent
    (19) A dog, came in. The dog, barked.
  - Uniqueness under quantification (Kadmon 1987)
    (20) Every unicycle had a puncture in the tire. (Roberts 2003:ex. (6))

- Demonstrative descriptions with *that* are acceptable when a unique referent is identifiable on the basis of the description, previous context and a *demonstration or public speaker intention* (Kaplan 1977; King 2001; Roberts 2002).
  - Physically demonstrated referent
    (21) [pointing at a chair] That chair looks comfortable.
  - Most recently mentioned antecedent
    (22) A woman, entered from stage right. Another woman, entered from stage left. That woman, was carrying a basket of flowers. (Roberts 2002)

- Demonstrative descriptions with *this* are acceptable when a unique referent is identifiable on the basis of the description, previous context, and demonstration or public speaker intention, *and the referent is proximal to the speaker*.
  - Physical proximity
    (23) [pointing at nearby lectern] This lectern is wooden.
    (24) * [pointing at distant door] This door is the emergency exit.
  - “Proximity” in linguistic context as speaker identifiability
    - Cataphoric use: speaker subsequently identifies referent (Fillmore 1997)
    (25) I bought this book today. [speaker reveals a book]
    (26) There are still these candidates to interview: Lugton, Barnes, Airey, and Fostor. (Huddleston and Pullum 2001:1509)
  - Indefinite *this* (Prince 1981)
    (27) One time I went to the roof of this project and there’s this big black guy about six seven on top of the stairs. He had his back to me... 
  - “Speaker activation” (Gundel et al. 1993)
    (28) A: Have you seen the neighbor’s dog?
    B: Yes, and ??this/that dog kept me awake all night.
    (29) The neighbors have a dog and this/that dog kept me awake all night.
  - “Proximity” in linguistic context as recency of mention
    - See Fillmore (1997) on French, German

5 Putting the pieces together

- This section: how the nonuniqueness condition on demonstratives can be understood as a conversational implicature.

5.1 Basic reasoning

- DPs with fewer conditions are preferred.
- Semantically unique content guarantees that there will be a unique referent; no need for demonstration or speaker proximity.
- All else being equal, definite article preferred over demonstrative determiner with semantically unique content.

5.2 Emotive demonstratives

- Emotive layer of meaning conveyed by (a use of) the demonstrative determiner.
- *The* doesn’t (conventionally) contribute this layer of meaning.
- If emotive layer is conveyed, there is a reason to use the demonstrative regardless of the status of the descriptive content.
Why might a demonstrative contribute the emotive layer of meaning?

Some possibilities:

- Speaker intention to refer with an emotive component
- Solidarity as an extension of familiarity
  - Successful demonstration or publicly accessible speaker intention requires familiarity.
  - Familiality involves knowledge about the context shared by the discourse participants; this is what “solidarity” emphasizes.

Interim summary:

- The implicature-based account of nonuniqueness extends naturally to emotive demonstratives, explaining why this use is exempt from the nonuniqueness condition.
- It’s not surprising that demonstratives have an emotive use (and in fact this use is not limited to English).

5.3 Postmodified demonstratives

- This construction is only an apparent exception to the nonuniqueness condition.
- The exceptional properties of the construction suggest that the postnominal modifier is outside the DP.
  - Scopal possibilities show that postnominal modifiers may contain bound (individual or world) variables; the content of an ordinary demonstrative may not.
  - The “attributive” interpretation can be captured as an effect of a bound world variable.
  - The apparent “binding conditions” follow straightforwardly from the following assumptions: demonstrative determiners disallow bound variables in their c-command domain, and postnominal modifiers may be located outside this domain.
- The nonuniqueness condition then applies as usual to the NP complement of the demonstrative determiner.

6 In Sum

- The nonuniqueness condition on demonstrative descriptions is a conversational implicature.
- In at least one special circumstance — “emotional deixis” — it is canceled.
- It arises due to interaction with definite descriptions.
- The meaning of a determiner cannot be fully understood in isolation: the system of determiners available in a language must be taken into consideration.

References


