How Specific is an Utterance?
Comments on Glanzberg(1999)

When talking about context dependence, we need to distinguish:

(1) what is needed for the interpretation (to go from a sentence to a proposition) from how you get what you need:

What is needed: an individual, a time, a set of individuals, a partition of the domain, a topic, a concept...

How do you get it? The semantic rules of language don’t care about that.

The distinction and some consequences as illustrated by an anecdote with two twins, one from San Francisco, the other from Boston.

Jack is hiking with the two twins, walking ahead of them, within earshot. The twins voices are identical. One of the twins utters the sentence in (2). Jack doesn’t know what content was expressed because he doesn’t know who was talking. Each of the twins does know. The utterer continues with (3) at which point Jack can determine the content of both utterances.

(2) I am going to paint my house next year.
(3) The city of San Francisco requires it.

Aspects of the twin example:

* the relevant feature is local at the moment of interpretation, necessarily.

* the process of finding the relevant feature is global, including subsequent discourse.

*the process of finding the relevant information is different for different discourse participants

(* As Glanzberg has demonstrated, this example is seriously misleading. In the
case of I, the language is so specific that it seems reasonable to say: “the context of use determines the referent of the indexical”. In most other cases, the language specifies what is needed, but in a general enough way that we can’t simply say the context determines the meaning. )

It turns out then, that not only can users differ on how they get what they need for interpretation (as with the twins) but they may arrive at different values in the same context and:

(4) Language users can’t always get what the language demands.

This doesn’t necessarily have to lead to a breakdown in communication:

**Strategies for overcoming ignorance**

**LEAVE IT TO AN EXPERT:**

(2) Only [the house] was visible from the trees.

What is excluded by only? “The kinds of things a landscape designer would take to be relevant in describing a design to a client” (from Glanzberg 1999).

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**DOESN’T MATTER:**

Otto goes to a party and meets Tim Stowell and learns from him what a syntactician is. Otto doesn’t meet any other linguists, only art critics, though there were other syntacticians:

(5) Alex: Which syntacticians did you meet?
    Otto: I only met Stowell.

What is excluded by only? meeting syntacticians other than Stowell.

Otto doesn’t know what is in the domain of quantification, because he doesn’t know who the other syntacticians were. He knows Alex knows, and Alex will interpret his utterance accordingly. But he also knows it doesn’t matter. Any subset of the non-art-critics would make his statement true.

Otto doesn’t know what he is saying, at least not in the way that Alex does, and Otto is aware that his statement is being interpreted in this more specific way.

As a hearer strategy:
(6) Watch out he’s trying to shoot you (van Deemter 1991).

Hearer ducks, he doesn’t know what the referent is for the indexical, but it doesn’t matter.
For any referent of *he*, the same conclusion results.

**Ball Park**

(7) The curator noticed the missing painting.

(7) is about a moment in time when the noticing occurred. Nevertheless, the speaker may have in mind a restricted set of candidate times, but not a specific moment.

(8) The prisoners spoke to each other.

Not every prisoner spoke to every other. Who spoke to whom? This may or may not be obvious from the discourse. If not, the speaker is relying on the fact that there is SOME partitioning that answers this question. (Note: this is not a *doesn’t matter* case because the speaker is not reasoning that (8) is true for all partitions).

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chart showing possible connections to the strategies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Consult an Expert</th>
<th>Doesn’t Matter</th>
<th>Ballpark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>related to:</td>
<td>kind terms (Putnam 1975)</td>
<td>supervaluation</td>
<td>diagonalization (Stalnaker 1978) (we don’t know which context we are in, but we know we are one where the sentence is true)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>where found:</td>
<td>generics</td>
<td>explaining apparent uniqueness violations (Kadmon 1991 ‘3.6),</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>strong readings of donkey pronouns</td>
<td>weak readings of donkey pronouns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ambiguity resolution in NLP: van Deemter(1999)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(9) Conversation is about character, not (necessarily) about content.

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1 Here I’m relying on work of mine on reciprocals (Types of Individuals, *Linguistics and Philosophy* and my book *Pluralities*) according to which the context determines who did what to whom.
There is no absolute sense of “what is said”.

(10) Dthat is a picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th Century.

Apply the lawyer’s ‘Reasonable Person Standard’

(I think this example is from the end of a paper by Kaplan and I think my point here was the hearer doesn’t see what the speaker is pointing at, the picture is behind and above the hearer. The “Reasonable Person Standard” is something lawyers actually talk about).

Conclusion: Language use global. A “context dependent meaning” is a meaning that can be fixed with the aid of contextual information, but it doesn’t have to be.

REFERENCES

...As far as the semantics is concerned, I assume the standard picture that you are assuming. Namely, if a variable is free it must get assigned a value by the context and that entails some agreement among the participants about what the value is. Depending on the case, they may 'think' of this value in more extensional terms (the guy over there, the time it is now) or more intensional terms (the paintings they have in the Brooklyn Museum, the time when Napoleon went to Corsica), but the value is 'on the table' in some sense. Free variables will also differ on the amount of restriction that the semantics puts on them. So in standard cases of "now" there is not much leeway, it's got to be the speech time, deictic "he" has to be male and "that" has to be something that I am pointing to etc. Things start to get murkier the less restriction there is. Now this is obviously completely different from standard _unrestricted_ quantification, where no negotiation is necessary. If we take "some cat" to involve unrestricted quantification, then if I say "some cat is crying": I don't have to have a cat in mind, if I do have one, I don't need to make sure you have it in mind, and if in fact the one I have in mind is not crying but another one is crying, we still judge my sentence as true.

Ok, so now we ask what happens if a speaker uses a sentence that has one of these free variables and it is not clear to all what the relevant value is for that variable. You could imagine different possible scenarios. Possibly the simplest is where the speaker herself has a value in mind but the hearer doesn't know what it is. The hearer could try to ask about it. But this isn't always necessary. Suppose I say "that cat needs food so could you pick some up for me when you go to the store". And suppose you don't know which cat I am pointing to. Well then you haven't understood what I said. Is that a problem? Assuming the type of cat food you buy is not dependent on which cat it is, you could just go off and get the food. As linguists we can describe what happened here as follows. Suppose the cat that I was pointing to was named Plato. Then I have expressed the proposition that:

(a) Plato needs food

and you have understood/gathered that:

(b) Some cat that Roger has pointed to needs food.

Which means that in some funny sense what started out life as a case of a context dependent free variable ended up somehow as an existentially quantified one.

Even when you go off to the store and get the food etc, you never believe that you completely understood what I said, since you didn't know I meant Plato. So I am not saying that my utterance has the existential meaning, ie that there is no difference between the two. However, you could see that in many cases, it would be quite hard to show that. But this allows us to turn the heat up a little...

Let's call what you did in the cat example "an existential adjustment". The context wasn't rich enough to supply a value to a variable, so you just assume we must be in SOME context that fixes it, and so (b) has to be true. Now, suppose I can rely on your making existential adjustments, at least in some cases. Well then, I might capitalize on this. If the conditions are right, I could utter something that has a free variable, where even I didn't know the value, relying on the fact that you will make an existential adjustment. I think there are even mirror image cases, where the speaker doesn't know the value of the variable and the hearer does -- for example if you come back from the store and say "I got food for that cat".

The last paragraph benefits from remarks of Kai von Fintel in a recent talk.

The connection with my book is that I concluded from the context dependence of plural-predication that there was a free partition variable. That means that in principle I should not be able to say "the marbles plural-VP" unless there is a salient partition in the conversation which divides the marbles up. But sometimes, one seems to want a reading paraphrased as 'for some way of partitioning the marbles, ...". This problem seemed very similar to the tense examples. Sometimes one uses a past tense with a specific time in mind, but not always.
The big question is what in fact are the conditions on using existential adjustment. Here's something from conversation with Ede Zimmermann. The general picture of "existential adjustment" is very like a process that Stalnaker uses called diagonalization. Ede said that Rob van Rooy has this idea in his dissertation, ie to extend diagonalization to derive existential interpretations. Now, Ede pointed out a difference between Stalnaker's cases and mine. In Stalnaker's cases, there is a fact of the matter. One of the cases has to do with "now" which the language says has to be the speech time. In his example, the parties to the conversation don't know what the speech time is and so they do something like existential adjustment. But they do this to arrive at the 'right answer', the one determined by the language and the world. But in the putative marble cases, there are no facts of the world+situation that decide the matter. I am not quite sure how I feel about this.

I don't know if I have made things easier or harder. If it's the latter then maybe you should just take my remarks to raise the following question: in the cases you are interested in, how could you establish the distinction you want, given the scenario with Plato the cat, outlined above.