

Meaning underdetermines what is said, therefore utterances express many propositions*

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Abstract

Linguistic meaning underdetermines what is said. This has consequences for philosophical accounts of meaning, communication, and propositional attitude reports. I argue that the consequence we should endorse is that utterances typically express many propositions, that these are what speakers mean, and that the correct semantics for attitude reports will handle this fact while being relational and propositional.

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1 Introduction

According to many philosophers of language there are things that we mean i.e. propositions. There is an intuitively clear, but theoretically complex, distinction between a speaker meaning what a sentence they utter means and meaning something else. H. P. Grice marked this distinction as between *what is said* and *what is implicated*; the distinction is the important thing, not the terminology. One way to formulate a theory of communication which provides a framework for making this distinction is to describe sentences, in context, as having *contents* determined by the linguistic properties, in context, of the components of these sentences and the way they combine. These contents are propositions. When one intends to communicate a proposition which is the content of the sentence one utters, one has said that proposition; intending to indirectly convey a distinct proposition also entails that one means it but not that one says it. The success of the intentions of the speaker can then be defined in terms of the uptake of the proposition meant. I will be defending a version of this view, with a significant amendment: multiple propositions are said, in the appropriate technical sense, by most utterances.

I will argue that the move to the multiple proposition view is the most conservative response to a challenge that arises for the standard view of content and communicative success. The challenge has been raised most effectively by Ray Buchanan (Buchanan 2010, 2012, 2013). My paper can be best understood as accepting several of Buchanan’s key premises while rejecting his conclusions; I will do this by offering an alternative theory of content and communication. The multiple proposition view plays a key role in my alternative theory. I defend the multiple proposition view on the basis that the theory that entails it is overall simpler and more powerful than the alternative. Someone who accepts Buchanan’s premises should then accept the multiple proposition view rather than Buchanan’s own solution to the challenge that Buchanan raises to the standard view.

A key premise of Buchanan’s argument, which I accept, is the *underdeterminacy* thesis (section 2). This is the thesis that the linguistic meaning of a sentence, even in context, does not fix what is said, in a certain technical sense, by an utterance of that sentence in that context. There are of course debates about whether the underdeterminacy thesis is true of natural languages; I will just assume that it is because I am interested in exploring its consequences. There is also a risk of terminological confusion around the underdeterminacy thesis. Unfortunately, there is no way to frame the thesis in a way that respects all the various ways that philosophers of language and linguists have used terms like ‘what is said’ and ‘linguistic meaning’. I will now explain how I will be using the terms in this paper.

I assume that the parts of sentences have semantic properties. These are context invariant and combine in various ways which results in the semantic properties of sentences i.e. their context insensitive linguistic meanings. These linguistic meanings interact with contexts of utterance and the result is the content of the sentence in that context; it is a substantial question whether these contents are always or sometimes full propositions. In addition to this notion of sentence content there is a conceptually distinct level of *what is said*. This is fully propositional content that may be identical to the content arising from linguistic meaning and context or may be a development of it. The contrast that the notion is supposed to help us to formulate is between a content conveyed directly via the sentence uttered and one conveyed indirectly by means such as implicature. Examples of something that falls on one side or the other are controversial: in particular, those who reject the underdeterminacy thesis often argue that something that is intuitively conveyed is an implicature rather than part of what is said. Furthermore, the identification of what is said often relies on theorists’ intuitions, or a range of diagnostics which are themselves controversial. Some of these difficulties will not be relevant to my argument in this paper. It would be enough for my purposes to get agreement just on the point that there are things that speakers mean that are very closely related to the contents of the sentences that they are utter, and other things that are not of which conversational implicatures are the paradigm example. When I argue, as I will in what follows, that there are multiple propositions that are said, this is the main idea I am defending: multiple propositions are conveyed in this way and not in the implicature way.¹

2 Underdeterminacy

For concreteness, I will focus on just one formulation of the underdeterminacy thesis, the version defended by Robyn Carston (Carston 2002, 19).

¹I should also address the question of literalness, if only to say that I will avoid using the term ‘literal’ because of its potential for confusion. Literal meaning could just be what is said, in which case I have the same view about the former as the latter, of course. It could also be used to identify something like linguistic meaning or content in context. This means that the question of whether the multiple proposition view I defend is a novel view about what is literal is really a question of whether what is literal is identical to what is said. I should note that I do not intend this as a view about any particular technical use of the term ‘literal’; I merely want to make it clear that I can answer the question about whether my view is that there are multiple literal contents, but that I think that the question is terminological.

Underdeterminacy Linguistic meaning underdetermines what is said.

Both ‘linguistic meaning’ and ‘what is said’ are terms of art. I will be following Carston’s usage throughout this paper.

Linguistic Meaning The *linguistic meaning* of a sentence (in context) is what it encodes in virtue of the meanings of its parts (in context) and the way they combine.

What is Said *What is said* by the utterance of a sentence in context is the proposition(s) that hearers take to be communicated, or expressed, by that utterance.

As used here, *express* is a term for something that speakers do, just like *communicate*; note that ‘express’ is not used to pick out a semantic property of the sentence used, as ‘encode’ would be by Carston. Speakers express propositions by uttering sentences; I will sometimes use the formulation that the utterance of the sentence expresses what the utterer expresses.

As Carston notes, and discusses at length in Carston (2002, chaps 1–2); Carston (2008), the notion of *what is said* that is being used here is more restrictive than at least some uses of the term. What is said, in this sense, does not include implicature, nor some examples of nonliteral speech such as irony. What is said, in this sense, tracks a psychologically real category of intuitive truth conditions; see also Recanati (2001); Recanati (2002); Recanati (2004). Theorists disagree about what counts as what is said as opposed to what is implicated (or conveyed in some similar nonliteral way). This is an important question but it is not one that I need to resolve in order to make the argument I want to make in this paper. The important point is that there is such a distinction, and Underdeterminacy is defined in its terms. Underdeterminacy must be understood in these terms in order to be an interesting thesis. Suppose ‘what is said’ was used to pick out a more expansive concept such that it included clear cases of implicature. Everybody agrees that linguistic meaning underdetermines what is implicated, so Underdeterminacy would be trivially true. Furthermore, given that everybody agrees that a sentence can encode one thing and implicate something distinct, it follows that utterances can express multiple propositions. So the multiple proposition view would be uncontroversial if ‘express’ and ‘what is said’ are used in this broad way.²

Carston gives a variety of examples in the course of her defence of Underdeterminacy including (1).

- (1) This steak is raw.

Focusing on the adjective ‘raw’, Carston’s claim is that it can be used to express a range of concepts depending on various contextual factors. In one sort of standard case it might be used to express RAW*: a concept of being somewhat cooked but insufficiently to eat. In another slightly different context the concept expressed might be RAW**. This variation is what makes it plausible that,

²Another point to note here is that the definition given in What is said appeals to the intuitive judgements of speakers and hearers. This raises complex questions about whether speakers and hearers must explicitly entertain the propositions in question. For my purposes, I need only the idea that these propositions capture the intuitive truth conditions of the utterance that are in principle available to competent speakers even if they are not explicitly entertained; see Recanati (2001); Recanati (2004).

even if there is a concept that ‘raw’ encodes as its meaning, that is not what it contributes to what is said in a range of quite ordinary cases. Whether or not there is such an encoded concept doesn’t matter for the present argument. Carston writes in Carston (2002) that there is, and in Carston (2012) that there isn’t; see Huang (2017) for discussion and references. One could of course give many other examples. Colour terms such as ‘red’ are popular in the literature.

It is clear from Carston’s presentation of the view that the scope of her theory is very ordinary utterances of very ordinary sentences. People often utter sentences like (1), and often say things involving concepts like RAW*, in quite ordinary situations. There is nothing exotic about the syntax and semantics of (1), nor the kind of situation which provides the data for Carston’s theory.

There is no obvious way to localise the variability to something that can be neatly isolated and treated as a special property of a special class of expressions. So, if Carston’s view is correct the point generalises to a wide range of natural language utterances. Carston claims that it applies to every natural language utterance. This may well be true, but the weaker claim that Underdeterminacy is true of a large number of utterances will do for my argument here.

To structure the presentation of my argument I will discuss another recent attempt to engage with these issues. Buchanan has raised a series of problems about meaning and communication (Buchanan 2010, 2012). The claim is that, if one accepts certain views about language, including the underdeterminacy thesis, that are both plausible and popular, one cannot also accept what Buchanan calls the *standard view* about meaning and communication. Nor can one accept a certain popular Gricean account of meaning. Nor can one accept a certain view of the semantics of propositional attitude reports i.e. the view that ‘that’-clauses denote propositions.

I will argue for the following three claims:

1. While Buchanan’s argument does indeed give reason to reject the standard view, it does not give reason to reject an amended view that captures the central idea of the standard view.
2. While Buchanan’s argument does indeed give reason to reject a certain version of a Gricean account of meaning, it does not give reason to reject an amended view that captures the central idea of that Gricean account.
3. Buchanan’s argument does not give reason to reject a relational account of attitude reports.

All three points rely on the thesis that theorists of language should proliferate contents, i.e. that we should accept that it is commonplace for a sentence in context to be used to express many propositions; express here corresponds to ‘what is said’ in Carston’s sense. Equivalently, the idea will be that speakers utter these sentences and mean many propositions, and say them.

The view I will defend in this paper, presented in section 4, section 5, section 6, and section 7, is that perfectly ordinary utterances of simple declarative sentences typically express multiple propositions. This means that I deny the claim that an utterance typically expresses as many propositions as it contains clauses.³

³I am not merely endorsing the standard view that a single utterance can convey more than one thing in the broadest possible sense of ‘convey’ that includes e.g. conversational implicature.

3 Buchanan’s argument

Buchanan presents his argument with specific cases and then seeks to generalise them. The example I will focus on is (2).

(2) Every beer is in the bucket.

Buchanan provides the following context for an utterance of (2).

An hour before the party is to begin, Tim asks Chet ‘Are we ready to rage?’ ‘So bro’, Chet responds, ‘We are totally ready. The living room totally looks like a pirate ship. The strobe lights are up. Every beer is in the bucket. I just need to find an eye patch to wear with this pirate hat.’ (Buchanan 2010, 347)

Buchanan argues that this seemingly ordinary exchange raises a series of problems for traditional views of meaning and communication. The problems are generated by Underdeterminacy.

1. The domain over which the quantifier phrase ‘every beer’ ranges is restricted in a way not fully determined by the linguistic meaning of that expression.
2. The referent of the (incomplete) definite description ‘the bucket’ is not fixed by the linguistic meaning of that expression.

In both these cases, according to Buchanan, we should think of the linguistic meaning of the respective expressions as something incomplete; he calls these ‘templates’ or ‘TEMPS’.⁴ My position in this paper will be to accept Buchanan’s claim about the linguistic meaning of these expressions. I do this because I am interested in the consequences that he draws from the view. Furthermore, as (1) from section 1 shows, nothing much hangs on the use of examples that involve quantifier domain restriction or incomplete definite descriptions. A similar argument could be constructed with ‘raw’ or ‘red’ in very ordinary cases of Underdeterminacy. Given that Underdeterminacy generalises and that Buchanan’s arguments are based on Underdeterminacy, Buchanan’s arguments will generalise.

The other example Buchanan gives is non-sentential assertions such as

(3) a health inspector

I will focus on the quantifier domain restriction case, but I think that the argument is just as good when applied to non-sentential assertion. For a discussion and

Anybody who believes in conversational implicature endorses that view: if a speaker sometimes conveys P by saying it and Q by implicating it then two propositions have been conveyed, in the broad sense, by the utterance of a single sentence. The multiple proposition view is different in kind to this proposal because it claims that more than one proposition is conveyed by being said; these propositions are not implicatures and the multiple proposition view does not have anything distinctive to say about implicature. There are good reasons to think that standard attributions of saying allow for multiplicity (Cappelen and Lepore 2004). My claim is that a narrower and more theoretical notion of saying also allows for multiple propositions to be expressed, and that endorsing such a view is the best response to Buchanan’s argument as well as generally theoretically fruitful. Similarly, I concede that ordinary uses of terms like ‘convey’, ‘express’, ‘communicate’ often seem to track a broader notion. I intend to use them in the narrower sense that theorists have in mind when they discuss Underdeterminacy.

⁴Some theorists with this sort of view call such things ‘propositional radicals’, ‘propositional skeletons’, or ‘propositional schemata’; for the purposes of this paper there are no important differences between these.

defence of non-sentential assertion with references to the literature see Stainton (2005).⁵

4 The ‘standard view’

4.1 Content and success

Buchanan says that the standard view of meaning and communication among theorists of language is constituted by the following theses (Buchanan 2010, 342).

Content What a speaker means, or intends to communicate, (at least in cases of indicative speech) must be a proposition.

Success Understanding a speaker’s utterance U requires (minimally) entertaining what they meant by U.

Content, I take it, is intended by Buchanan to require that there is a single proposition in question i.e. the proposition that the speaker intends to communicate and the proposition that the audience must entertain. Buchanan’s argument applies only to that way of understanding Content and Success. If, however, one construes Content and Success in a way that allows for a multiple proposition view then the argument does not succeed. This is the line of thought I will follow in the rest of this paper.⁶

Here is my formulation of Buchanan’s argument against the standard view.

1. The utterance of (2) in the context given was an instance of successful linguistic communication.
2. So, the audience must have entertained the unique proposition that the speaker meant. (From Content and Success)
3. So, there is a unique proposition such that it is a necessary condition for successful communication that the audience entertained it. (From premises 1 and 2)
4. But, there is no such proposition.
5. So, we must deny premise 1 or 2. (From premises 3 and 4)
6. It is better to deny premise 2. The conjunction of Content and Success entails premise 2, so we must deny at least one of them too.

⁵Buchanan’s example, involving both an incomplete definite description and quantifier domain restriction, suggests a connection to the extended discussion of these phenomena in contemporary philosophy of language. Indeed, my own view is partly inspired by a point made in that literature as I note in subsection 6.2. See Evans (1982, sec. 9.7); Neale (1993, sec. 3.7); Neale (2000); Neale (2004, 105–11) for discussion. Both Buchanan’s view and mine are compatible with what Stephen Neale calls the ‘implicit Russellian’ response to incompleteness. This is an important observation about the phenomenon, however, as I have emphasised, Underdeterminacy is more general than the kind of incompleteness at issue here: ‘raw’ and ‘red’ can be used to generate examples. This is of course assuming that Carston and those with similar views are right in their views. I have assumed this for the sake of argument, and as it happens I believe it. I thank an anonymous reviewer for the suggestion that this point should be explicitly noted.

⁶Note that Content is not describing what some theorists might call *semantic content* and define as the proposition assigned to a sentence in context. If Underdeterminacy is true then there is no such thing, and that is being assumed at this point in the paper. Content in the current sense is what Carston would call ‘what is said’, and can also be thought of as what is expressed by an utterance of a sentence.

Premise 1 is supposed to capture an intuitive sense in which an attempt at linguistic communication can be successful. The attempt to give a philosophical account of this is partly what this paper, and Buchanan's work, is about i.e. the Content and Success theses and the amendments to them I will defend. Premise 1 relies on the pre-theoretical idea that communication can succeed or fail: the audience either understands what the speaker is saying, or they don't.

Premise 4 is a key step. Buchanan's claim is that Underdeterminacy entails this premise. Therefore Underdeterminacy is incompatible with the standard view because it entails a premise in a sound argument against it. Premise 4 is the denial of premise 3. What is being denied is that there is a proposition such that entertaining it is a necessary condition for communicative success. It will be important to the argument to follow that the denial of premise 3 is not the denial that there are propositions which play a role in communicative success.

Buchanan justifies this key step from Underdeterminacy to premise 4 in the following way. Suppose that the linguistic meaning of (2) is a template. Following Buchanan (2010, 348) I will label it 'TEMP' and use the following notation:

TEMP [The y: Bucket(y) & _ y] ([Every x: Beer(x) & _ x] (x is in y))

On this view, the linguistic meaning of (2) is TEMP which is not what the speaker means or the audience grasps. The specifics of TEMP do not really matter for the argument I am interested in; any view on which linguistic meaning is obviously not what the speaker means or the audience grasps will generate the issue.

This is the main place that Underdeterminacy plays a role in the argument against the standard view. Suppose that, *contra* Underdeterminacy, the linguistic meaning of (2), once context is fixed, determines a proposition, and that this is what Chet said. That proposition, the encoded content of (2) in the context, would be a good candidate for being the unique proposition entertaining of which is necessary for communicative success.⁷ But, (2) lacks such a good candidate, because of Underdeterminacy. And, if Underdeterminacy is as general as Carston, Buchanan, and I believe, then there is nothing special about (2).

A related point is that someone might try to motivate a version of the argument without Underdeterminacy. The idea I have in mind is that someone might say that for a range of sentences it is the case that when people utter them they have no communicative intentions such they will be satisfied only by one particular proposition being entertained. This might be posited as a special feature of quantifier domains and/or definite descriptions; these features would then apply to (2). Someone who thinks that will reject the conjunction of Content and Success, because they accept premise 4, but not because they accept Underdeterminacy. They will take it that the standard view fails for at least a range of cases. I have no objection to such a view. The positive points I make in section 5, section 6, and section 7 do not rely on any particular way of motivating the rejection of the formulation of the standard view as the conjunction of

⁷One might still think that entertaining that proposition would not be sufficient for success, perhaps because one thinks that the proposition encoded is that every beer that exists is in the uniquely existing bucket i.e. something absurd and obviously false. On such a view entertaining that proposition might be a necessary condition for communicative success, perhaps because what the speaker meant must be inferred from such a proposition.

Content and Success. However, my way of motivating the rejection of the standard view is by appealing to Underdeterminacy. One feature of this is that the argument will apply very widely, given the ubiquity of Underdeterminacy.

Now consider the following descriptions of ways in which TEMP might be ‘filled in’ each of which is supposed to represent a distinct proposition (call these P1–P6):

1. Every beer *we bought at the bodega* is in the bucket *in the backyard*.
2. Every beer *we will serve at the party* is in the bucket *decorated in pirate motif*.
3. Every beer *for our guests* is in the bucket *filled with ice*.
4. Every beer *at the apartment* is in the bucket *next to the hot tub*.
5. Every beer *we bought at the bodega* is in the bucket *next to the hot tub*.
6. Every beer *at the apartment* is in the bucket *in the backyard*.

P1–P6 are all propositions that are compatible with TEMP in the context of utterance specified for (2). In this context, being compatible with TEMP is being a way in which the blanks in TEMP might be acceptably filled in. Exactly which propositions are compatible depends on context. How this works is a complex question although it is clear that there are restrictions (Stanley and Szabó 2000; Hall 2008; Pupa 2015). For the sake of simplicity I will pretend that P1–P6 are all the compatible propositions; the argument requires only that there is some number of such propositions greater than one.⁸

4.2 The multiple proposition view

In my reconstruction of Buchanan’s argument the important claim is that no one of P1–P6 is such that it is a necessary condition for successful communication that Tim entertains it. Chet will certainly have succeeded in his attempt at communication if Tim entertains any five of P1–P6; and, arguably, Chet would succeed even if Tim entertains only one. No proposition is such that if Tim fails to entertain it then the attempt at communication has failed. So, no proposition is such that it is a necessary condition for successful communication that the audience entertains it. Underdeterminacy comes in to play because, if (1) had as its linguistic meaning some proposition Q, then it would be plausible that the audience entertaining Q was a necessary condition for successful communication (which is not to say that Chet would have had to intend to communicate Q, nor that Tim would have had to think that he did). This shows that P1–P6, which are standing in for the entire set of propositions compatible with TEMP in the

⁸I will make the simplifying assumption that the boundary of the set of propositions is clear and precise; issues to do with vagueness may complicate things. This might form the basis of an objection to my version of the multiple proposition view. Assume for the sake of argument that the set of propositions is vague. If, as I will argue, the speaker has said, and means, all of the propositions in the set, it will follow that it is vague what the speaker has said and means. More precisely, there will be a range of borderline cases which are propositions such that it is indeterminate whether or not the speaker has said or means that proposition. This may be considered a troublesome result. However, it does not suggest that communication is impossible which is the consequence of simply accepting Buchanan’s argument without modifying the standard view. Nor does it give up the traditional account of communication in terms of propositions. These propositions need not be vague in any sense. So, I claim, even if the multiple proposition view does have this consequence it has compensating theoretical virtues.

context, cannot be distinguished regarding communicative success; none of them are special. If that is granted then premise 4 of the argument must be granted, and therefore the conjunction of Content and Success must be denied.

There is, however, a relatively conservative fix for the problem. Content and Success are vulnerable when they are read in such a way that there must be one unique proposition that is the content of an utterance, and that communication is successful only if it is entertained. These constraints can be relaxed. One way to reformulate Content and Success would be as follows (amendments to Content and Success have been emphasised).

Content 2 What a speaker means, or intends to communicate, (at least in cases of indicative speech) must be a proposition *or set of propositions*.

Success 2 Understanding a speaker's utterance U requires (minimally) entertaining *one or more of the propositions that they meant by U*.

The conjunction of Content 2 and Success 2 is not refuted by premise 4, so this variation on the standard view is compatible with Underdeterminacy. The revised theses avoid the problem with premise 4 because they do not entail that there is a single proposition that the speaker means, nor that there is a single proposition such that entertaining it is a necessary condition for successful communication. So, if someone finds the standard view compelling, and is also convinced by the various arguments for Underdeterminacy, then I suggest that they should take this variation seriously.

What I am proposing is an amended version of the standard view which, I claim, captures what is attractive about the original version while accommodating Underdeterminacy. Such a view is worth endorsing because it retains the centrality of propositions to theories of language and communication.

The view that follows from Content 2 and Success 2 is a multiple proposition view: it is a view according to which, at least sometimes, more than one proposition is expressed. More specifically, all of these propositions are expressed in just the same way that what is said is expressed. The difference is that there are many of them. I would also claim that they are all literal, with the caveats about how to understand 'literal' already given in section 1. This, I claim, is a way to respond to Buchanan's argument without either rejecting Underdeterminacy, or rejecting a theory that defines meaning and communication in terms of propositions.

This account of content has been motivated by an argument based on Underdeterminacy. I should make clear that the multiple proposition view is intended to be compatible with Underdeterminacy, and is compatible with it. None of the propositions in the set are encoded as the linguistic meaning of the uttered sentence. So, no proposition that is said is encoded as linguistic meaning, and the set isn't either. Proposing Content 2 as part of the multiple proposition view is therefore not denying Underdeterminacy.

An important issue that must be resolved is how to think about a speaker meaning a set of propositions, which is what Content 2 claims they can do. The short answer is that speaker means those propositions that they intend to communicate, and a speaker can intend to communicate more than one proposition. Fleshing this picture out will require thinking about the relationship between meaning and the phenomenon driving Buchanan's argument. I will turn to this question

in section 6.

Before that, in section 5, I will present the conclusion I want to draw from my discussion of Buchanan's argument in a way that is more independent of his presentation.

5 Communication and content

5.1 The role of propositions

I take it to be uncontroversial that two interconnected projects in philosophy of language focus on the nature of (linguistic) communication and the nature of content. The interconnection follows from the fact that various sorts of contents are candidates for being the objects of communication, therefore theories of one have consequences for theories of the other.

What Buchanan calls the standard view takes contents to be propositions and thinks of communication in terms of speakers intending to communicate propositions. The method by which speakers try to communicate propositions is uttering sentences. These sentences have linguistic meaning, in Carston's sense as described in section 1, which is compositionally determined. Linguistic meaning might not be propositional, on this view. As well as linguistic meaning there is what is said by the speaker in uttering that sentence, with its linguistic meaning, in the context. The point of Underdeterminacy, as defended by Carston and accepted by both Buchanan and me, is that what is said is not identical to linguistic meaning. What is said is defined in terms of what the audience entertains, and what the speaker means is what they intend their audience to entertain. So, these notions, meaning, in the sense of what the speaker means rather than linguistic meaning, and what is said, naturally fit together.

On what Buchanan calls the standard view they do naturally fit together. The speaker means a proposition. They utter a sentence which has that proposition as its linguistic meaning. If all goes well the audience identifies that very proposition as the linguistic meaning of that sentence in that context. This process may go wrong when the speaker and their audience have conflicting beliefs about e.g. which sentence was uttered, the way its parts combine to form a meaning, or the nature of the context. In a range of ordinary cases nothing does go wrong and communication succeeds.

As Buchanan argues, I think convincingly, Underdeterminacy requires us to abandon this standard view provided that we think that communication does succeed in lots of cases. I presented a version of his argument in section 4. Where we differ is in the response we want to make to this result.

My proposal is to retain the idea that propositions are the objects of communication in that they are what speakers mean. They are also what hearers entertain and communicative success is defined in terms of them. My, perhaps radical, proposal is that speakers mean a multiplicity of propositions. This proposal is captured by my amended versions of Content and Success in section 4.

5.2 Defending the multiple proposition view

I take this view, which is a sort of multiple proposition view and might be described as ‘propositional proliferation’, to be motivated by both detailed arguments such as my reconstruction of Buchanan’s argument against the standard view and also by a bigger picture conception of the relationship between content and communication.

I have in mind the following idea. There are contents, propositions, about which it is possible to form metaphysical theories. These are the contents of beliefs and the objects of communication. So, in a sense that can be specified in a philosophical theory, we communicate our thoughts to one another by using language. However, language does not encode contents even when the effects of context are accounted for. So, we do not communicate by encoding our thoughts in language or relying on the linguistic meaning of an utterance being identical to the content we intend to communicate. Instead we communicate by uttering a sentence with a certain linguistic meaning and intend that at least some of the things we mean will be grasped by our audience. Put another way, we express our thoughts multiply by exploiting the linguistic meanings of uttered sentences. There are many things we express, and many true, partial answers to the question of what we expressed when we made a particular utterance.

One might ask whether this view is important philosophically, and therefore worth defending. I think it is, for two related reasons. Firstly, the view gives a central role to propositions in a unified account of the contents of belief and the objects of communication i.e. the things we mean. This has been a major theme of twentieth century analytic philosophy of language. It is on this point that my position differs from Buchanan’s and I claim that this is an advantage for my view. I don’t mean that we should preserve a theory simply because it has previously been popular; that would be far too conservative. There is a tradition because there are good reasons for there to be. Discussion of this tradition and recent work within it can be found in Stevens (2004); King (2007); Gaskin (2008); Soames (2010); Collins (2011); King, Soames, and Speaks (2014); Hanks (2015); Merricks (2015); Soames (2015).

Secondly, the view allows for a clear and attractive picture of the relationship between propositions and sentences. Consider a view that posits a direct connection between the linguistic meaning of a sentence and a proposition that it is used to say. The standard view invited this identification because, on that view, what is said is a single proposition. So, it would seem plausible to think, the linguistic meaning ought to be that very proposition. This would then suggest that the way to proceed is to give an account of linguistic meaning that has that result. I have in mind one or other version of minimalism or indexicalism. The multiple proposition view does not invite this temptation.

Of course, those who identify linguistic meaning with propositions will not accept the above as an argument for the multiple proposition view. However, it is not intended to be. The argument for the view is the response to Buchanan’s argument against the standard view which concludes in endorsing Content 2, Success 2 (and, optionally, an amendment of our understanding of meaning to be discussed in section 6). My point is that the multiple proposition view is a distinctive philosophical position and that once it has been argued for it suggests

a certain way of looking at other debates which, I claim, is likely to be fruitful.

This is the greatest advantage of the way of looking at content and communication that follows from adopting the multiple proposition view. It is an advantage because it avoids what I take to be objectionable theories both about the nature of sentences and propositions that are motivated by the desire to maintain that linguistic meaning is propositional. I will not try to defend the claim that these theories are objectionable. For recent work on this question see Collins (2007); Hodgson (2013b). My claim is that the multiple proposition view offers a perspective from which these debates can be viewed which is both distinctive and illuminating.

I am not the first to claim that there can be more thoughts expressed than clauses, but I extend the view beyond a limited range of constructions such as (alleged) devices of conventional implicature. I will argue that the phenomenon is ubiquitous and follows from a basic feature of natural language. There are related views in the literature (Bach 1999; Neale 1999; Dever 2001; Corazza 2002; Braun and Sider 2007; Egan 2009; von Stechow and Gillies 2011; Perry 2012; Sullivan 2013; Dorr and Hawthorne 2014). My view can be situated amongst these, but it is not identical to any one of them.

6 Meaning and communicative intentions

6.1 The Gricean inheritance

Grice gave a famous definition of one sort of meaning (he has in mind *non-natural meaning*, roughly, the sort of meaning that utterances have rather than the way that smoke means fire).

“*A* meant [non-naturally] something by *x*” is (roughly) equivalent to
“*A* intended the utterance of *x* to produce some effect in an audience
by means of the recognition of this intention”[.] (Grice 1957, 385)

Philosophers and linguists have developed accounts of meaning based on this basic insight, and have criticised and amended it in various ways. My project in this section is to show how a view which includes this basic Gricean idea can accommodate the issues raised by Buchanan’s arguments. I won’t offer a general defence of a Gricean approach to meaning.⁹

Because my argument in this section is related only to Gricean intentions it could be separated from my arguments related to the standard view in section 4 without affecting the points I make in those sections. However, the current discussion of intentions is necessary to make those arguments relevant to those views that give a central role to communicative intentions. In particular, my formulation of the revised multiple proposition version of the standard view involves the notion of meaning. A Gricean, or anyone who thinks that communicative intentions are central to meaning, will want to know whether the multiple proposition view can say something intelligible about communicative intentions in order to support the appeal to meaning.

⁹Buchanan (2010 endnote 7) cites Davis (1992); Davis (2002) as an alternative view. Bar-On (2013) presents a useful discussion of the engagement between ‘post-Gricean’ relevance theorists such as Origgi and Sperber (2000) and non-Griceans such as Millikan (1987) on this question.

6.2 Meaning and asserting

The Gricean conception of meaning described in subsection 6.1 requires the speaker to intend to have an effect, i.e., in this case of verbal communication, that the audience entertain a proposition, by means of the recognition of that intention. Buchanan's view is that a speaker cannot reasonably have such an intention when using a natural language that has the property of Underdeterminacy. There is another way to respond, at least in principle, which is to claim that there are certain intentions that it is possible to have in conditions of Underdeterminacy which do underwrite attributions of meaning.

Firstly, I propose that there is a general intention that the speaker has towards a set of propositions. The intention is that one or more of these propositions is entertained by the audience. I leave open whether the speaker has to be thinking of those propositions as the propositions such that they intend that the audience entertains one of them. It would be enough for my purposes merely that their intention does in fact determine a set of propositions; dispositions to be satisfied with certain outcomes may well be relevant here. This is not a Gricean communicative intention: there is no requirement for the speaker to intend that the entertaining happens on the basis of recognising this set directed intention. This avoids the requirement that the audience in some way recognises which set of propositions is intended.

Secondly, I propose that because the speaker has this intention directed at a set of propositions, in the example borrowed from Buchanan this will be P1–P6, they have a special sort of intention directed at each member of that set. I will call this an *intention**. What makes an *intention** special is that it is parasitic on an intention that can be satisfied in multiple ways, and is directed at one of the ways in which it would be satisfied. Because the speaker has an intention that one or more of P1–P6 is entertained by their audience they therefore have an *intention** directed at each proposition in that set that it is entertained. The key difference between having this *intention** and the corresponding intention is that the *intention** is not thwarted if the particular proposition it is directed at is not entertained. My preferred way of thinking about these *intentions** is as corresponding to the set of sufficient conditions for the satisfaction of the intention they are derived from.

I have called *intentions** a special sort of intention. This might suggest an objection: if *intentions** are intentions then the account will fail because of Buchanan's argument, and if they're not it is (i) unclear what they are and (ii) unclear whether they can feature in Gricean theories of meaning and communication. My response is that strictly speaking *intentions** are not intentions. They are states that a subject is in. They are in those states in virtue of having an intention that can be satisfied multiple ways, but which cannot be identified with a broader intention. This is the structure of the communicative case. The speaker's intention would be satisfied by the audience entertaining any one of P1–P6, but cannot be reduced to the intention that they entertain the set or a disjunction (or disjunction of conjunctions of proper subsets). The speaker's intentions determine their *intentions**. I call *intentions** a sort of intention because I want to emphasise that they can be used in Gricean theory: what I mean is that they can play the roles required of intentions in that theory. I

would be happy to concede that they are not intentions in any sense as long as it is accepted that they can play the required role.

In order to vindicate the claim about roles it will be necessary to show that intentions* can be recognised. I think that they can, because recognition of an intention* can be reduced to partial recognition of an intention. Recall that intentions* correspond to ways that a particular intention would be satisfied. Recognising an intention*, I claim, is recognising that the subject has an intention that would be satisfied in that way. This does not fully characterise the subject's intention; it is recognition that the intention has a property. I know of no reason to think that the above description does not pick out something possible. If it is possible to recognise an intention to get one to entertain P on the basis of an utterance then surely it is possible to recognise that the speaker has an intention that would be satisfied in a particular way i.e. by the audience entertaining P. When an intention can be satisfied more than one way, I know of no reason to think that the ways cannot be recognised independently of one another. That is just what it is to recognise an intention*.

It is possible for the speaker to have a Gricean communicative intention*. In that case, I propose, the speaker means the proposition they intend* their audience to entertain. A speaker will typically have intentions* towards several propositions: they mean them all. My proposal is therefore that the Gricean definition of meaning, as formulated in Buchanan (2010, 343) as M*, be amended from Meaning to Meaning 2.

Meaning A speaker *means the proposition P* by uttering U only if, for some audience A, they produce U intending that (i) A come to entertain P on the basis of their utterance, (ii) A recognise their intention (i), at least in part, on the basis of the fact that she uttered U.

Meaning 2 A speaker *means the proposition P* by uttering U only if, for some audience A, they produce U *intending** that (i) A come to entertain P on the basis of their utterance, (ii) A recognise their *intention** (i), at least in part, on the basis of the fact that she uttered U.

In both these definitions the things that speakers mean are propositions. Uttering a sentence is a kind of action and the intentions/intentions* that the speaker has when they make the utterance fix which proposition, or propositions they mean. The objects of intentions and intentions* are states of affairs e.g. *A's coming to entertain P*. Note that in both cases the intention/intention* in question applies to both conditions (i) and (ii): the speaker intends/intends* that the audience entertains P on the basis of recognising that very intention/intention*.

This would be a relatively conservative change to the definition of meaning. It is recognisably Gricean while dealing with Buchanan's problem. It is also compatible with Content 2 and Success 2 from section 4, and would account for the definition of those theses in terms of sets of propositions. My claim is that Content 2 and Success 2 are plausible because they reflect the definition of meaning captured in Meaning 2, and the intuitions that they are designed to capture are connected to what speakers mean.

I will say something in subsection 6.3 to further motivate the introduction of intention*. Before that I would like to make explicit the structure of my argument for introducing it. Consider the context of Chet and Tim's exchange.

1. The utterance of (2) in the context given was an instance of successful linguistic communication.
2. A broadly Gricean theory of communication in terms of the recognition of intentions is true.
3. So, Tim (the audience) must have recognised an intention of Chet's (the speaker).
4. No standard intention will do, for reasons given by Buchanan.
5. So, some kind of non-standard intention, intention*, is present to account for premises 1 and 3.

I take premise 5 to follow as an inference to the best explanation from premises 1, 2, and 4. I have tried to define intention* to be exactly the sort of state needed to support premises 1 and 2 given 4. My aim is to make the inference to conclusion 5 as plausible as possible.

If we assume that premise 1 and 4 hold then the only way to deny conclusion 5 is to deny premise 2. That means giving up the best worked out theory of human communication. This is something that some people are already committed to, but they are not the target audience for the argument. Rather I intend to convince those who think that premise 2 is worth preserving that it can be preserved by accepting the notion of intention* and that this is a good reason to develop a theory of intentions*.

There is some precedent for a notion like intention*. Firstly, Buchanan and Gary Ostertag appeal to a similar notion, *sloppy-intention* in their defence of Bertrand Russell's theory of definite descriptions.¹⁰

Thus, in uttering *g* [(‘The guy’s late’)], *S* didn’t mean, indeterminate or otherwise, any description-theoretic proposition. Nevertheless, *S* would, if asked to be more explicit, offer any one of a number of such propositions. For example, though in uttering *g* *S* didn’t mean that the author of *Smells and Ticks* is late, he would be happy if *A* would, on the basis of this utterance, come to entertain this proposition. *S* would, however, be equally happy if *A* were instead to entertain the proposition that the guy reputed to have solved the mind-body problem is late, or that the guy we are waiting for is late, and so on. In general, *S*’s communicative intentions, whatever they are, will be satisfied if *A* entertains any one of these propositions. To give this phenomenon a label, call such communicative intentions *sloppy meaning-intentions* (henceforth we will use *s-means* for ‘sloppy means’ and *s-intends* for ‘sloppy intends’). (Buchanan and Ostertag 2005, 902)

My proposal of intention* is inspired by Buchanan and Ostertag’s. I am also happy to use the test proposed in the quoted passage as a rough diagnostic for the presence of an intention* directed at P: the speaker’s happiness to accept the audience’s entertaining of P (among other possibilities) as satisfaction of their overall intention is evidence of their intention* directed at P.

There is also a notion in relevance theory that is similar to intention*: *weak implicature* or its more general form *weak communication*. Weak implicature

¹⁰This is the connection to the literature on incomplete descriptions that I noted in section 3.

is described in Wilson and Sperber (2004, sec. 4). According to Wilson and Sperber's relevance theory approach, implicatures are generated in order to satisfy the standing assumption that communicating agents make utterances in order to express relevant propositions. Very roughly, if the linguistic meaning does not satisfy the expectation of relevance then a search for a implicated content is triggered. If a proposition P must be entertained in order to secure the relevance of the utterance then it is strongly implicated. If a range of propositions are such that any one of them would secure the relevance of the utterance but none of them are strongly implicated then they are all weakly implicated. Communicative success relies only on the recovery of one or more weak implicatures in that case.¹¹

6.3 Indifference and intention

Assume that Underdeterminacy is true of the natural languages spoken by humans, and that competent speakers know this at least tacitly. A rational, co-operative speaker will know that a typical utterance of a sentence like (2) will be compatible with a range of propositions. The context of utterance will constrain these options along with the meaning of (2), but not down to one. The audience will, even in the most perfect cases of communicative success, at best entertain one of these propositions that is compatible with the constraints of meaning and context.

A rational, co-operative speaker who knows these facts about language will have to be in some sense *indifferent* about which of the propositions it is that the audience entertains. This is the thought that motivates Buchanan's argument.

The **fundamental problem** with the standard theory is that even if the theorist appeals to vagueness (and indeterminacy) she cannot adequately capture the special kind of *generality* and *indifference* characteristic of the communicative intentions of a speaker uttering sentences such as (2) . . . while retaining the two theses definitive of her view. (Buchanan 2010, 356)

The view I am advocating is a way to accommodate this insight.

To knowingly utter (2) intending to communicate one of a proper subset of the propositions fixed by its meaning and the context is to do something that such a speaker knows is likely to fail. Rational agents don't do that sort of thing when they have other options. The speaker in this case does have other options. They could utter a different sentence that imposes different, more restrictive, restrictions on the propositions. That they did not is evidence that their intentions were not more restrictive. So, they were indifferent among the propositions determined by the meaning of what they uttered and the context of utterance.

This does not prove that the speaker's intentions were in fact intentions*. What it does show is that an account is needed of how their intentions can be indifferent. If the speaker has an intention towards the set of propositions and an intention* towards each member of the set then indifference follows. This is supporting evidence for an account in terms of intention*.

¹¹I thank Robyn Carston for drawing this to my attention.

6.4 Restrictions on intention

I will now offer support for the claim that the only communicative intentions that a rational agent could have in the sorts of case under discussion are intentions*. Wayne Davis and Neale have both argued that certain communicative intentions are impossible (Davis 1992, 233–34; Neale 2005, 181).

The Davis–Neale point can be summed up in the form of an argument.

1. One cannot intend what one believes to be impossible.
2. Audiences do not directly access speakers' intentions; they form hypotheses about them based on the evidence they are given.
3. Competent speakers know premise 2.
4. A speaker expecting an audience to arrive at their intention without evidence amounts to expecting the audience to access the speaker's intention directly, rather than through the evidence the speaker has provided.
5. The expectation in premise 4 would be an expectation of something impossible.
6. So, a speaker cannot intend to express a content by using a signal that does not exploit the way in which the speaker's audience will use that signal in arriving at an interpretation of the speaker's meaning.

Davis and Neale take premise 1 from their respective readings of Wittgenstein and Grice (Grice 1971; Wittgenstein 2001). Premise 2 is a general constraint on the way that utterances (or other signals) can be used to make manifest communicative intentions. One cannot expect the audience to arrive at the correct interpretation of the signal by magic; the signal must actually provide a guide to the intended interpretation. If the argument goes through then we have a constraint on speakers' intentions.

This constraint will in turn motivate the move to intentions*. This is because a straight-forward intention to communicate any one proposition, e.g. from P1–P6, would be ruled impossible by the constraint. Given the other possible propositions, the speaker would know that they are not providing the right sort of evidence for their favoured proposition, and that will make the intention impossible for them to form.

What this shows is that if we are going to have a theory of communication in terms of intentions at all the intentions in question must have the properties I have attributed to intentions*. It might turn out that philosophers and psychologists working on intentions will provide a knock-down objection to intentions*, which would in turn be a knock-down objection to the intention based account. In the absence of such an objection anyone sympathetic to the intention based account of communication will have to accept intentions*.

7 Relational attitude reports

7.1 Buchanan's relational view

I have now presented two of the three responses to Buchanan's argument that I mentioned in section 1. I will now present my response to Buchanan's argument against a relational theory of attitude reports. He takes this argument to follow

from the failure of the standard view; I will argue that there is a natural response available to someone who accepts my amended version of the standard view.

A popular view is that attitude reports are *relational*: they report a relation, such as belief, between a subject and a proposition that they believe. There is a diversity of opinion on what propositions are, but any account of their nature can count as relational; see Moltmann (2013, chap. 4) for a summary (but not endorsement) of the view. Buchanan has a relational view that is not propositional: he takes the *relata* of attitude reports to be subjects and certain properties of propositions.

Here are two examples of attitude reports from Buchanan (2010, 362):

- (4) Chet said that George W. Bush lives in Washington.
- (5) Chet believes that George W. Bush lives in Washington.

Here is what Buchanan has to say about the examples.

[W]hile believing is a relation to propositions, the similarity between, for example, (4) and (5), is that in both reports the semantic value of the that-clause is a proposition-type, say [A]. The crucial difference between saying and believing would then consist in the fact that, while (4) is true just in case Chet said [A], (5) is true if, and only if, Chet believes some proposition of the type [A]. On this suggestion, the fundamental objects of our beliefs are not the contents of our speech acts. (Buchanan 2010, 362–63)

I will formulate Buchanan’s point as the *proposition-type* thesis.

Proposition-type In both speech and belief reports the contribution of the ‘that’-clause to the proposition expressed by the report is a proposition-type.

I have already argued that what we say are propositions, and I agree with Buchanan that what we believe are propositions. I therefore deny his claim quoted above that ‘the fundamental objects of our beliefs are not the contents of our speech acts’. I also deny the remaining claim of the proposition-type thesis: the semantic contribution of a ‘that’-clause to the proposition expressed by a report, including belief reports, is a proposition.

In Buchanan (2010) the claim is that propositions are not the semantic values of ‘that’-clauses, but they are what we believe (although not what we say). I have focused on Buchanan’s earlier argument, but I intend the proposal in subsection 7.2 to be an alternative to both the views that Buchanan has defended.

7.2 A multiple proposition relational view

The multiple proposition relational view is a simple generalisation of the multiple proposition view applied to ordinary sentences. The guiding idea is that a ‘that’-clause picks out a proposition, and the report attributes a relation between the subject and that proposition. These two examples report *belief* and *hope*, respectively.

- (6) Chet believes that every beer is in the bucket.

(7) Chet hopes that every beer is in the bucket.

Because an utterance of the embedded clause ‘every beer is in the bucket’ (i.e. (2)) would express multiple propositions, the reports (6) and (7) do too. They express the propositions that the subject of the report believes each proposition that would be expressed by an utterance of the embedded clause. Assuming for simplicity that in the context of the report the propositions that would be expressed by an utterance of the embedded clause are P1–P6, and that there is no other source of propositional proliferation, the set of propositions expressed by (6) will be: {belief(Chet, P1), . . . , belief(Chet, P6)}. The same will hold for desire reports, speech reports, and all attitudes towards propositions.

An important feature of this view is that none of the propositions expressed by the report has the set of propositions as a constituent. None of the things that the reporter says is that the subject of the report believes a set of propositions. Making the report therefore does not in any sense require the reporter to conceive of such a set or have any kind of attitude towards it, nor does it suggest that the subject of the report must do so in order for the report to be true.

This view has several advantages. Firstly, it is compatible with popular and attractive views about attitude reports and the form of the propositions expressed by them: the view therefore preserves the natural account of why Chet’s believing that P and Tim’s believing that P entail that there is something that Chet and Tim both believe. The account also preserves these entailment relations across different attitudes. Secondly, there is no need to add any special semantic machinery to deal with attitude reports. The account follows naturally from a claim about what the embedded clauses express. Thirdly, this account is compatible with many accounts of what propositions are. It can be accepted by neo-Russellians or neo-Fregeans. The account is intended to be neutral on all questions of the nature of propositions, including recent debates about the proper conception of propositional truth (Recanati 2007; Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009; MacFarlane 2014). All such views can be combined with the multiple proposition view.

A final advantage of the view is that it provides a solution to a problem recently raised by Delia Belleri (Belleri 2014, 2016). Belleri argues that, since natural language sentences do not encode propositions, they cannot report fully propositional beliefs. The premise about encoding is supported by appeal to Carston’s arguments. Belleri’s solution is that some of our thoughts are under specified in the way that natural language sentences are. This conclusion solves the problem, but it is a radical departure from standard views of the semantics of thought; see e.g. Fodor (2001); Carston (2008). The multiple proposition relational view suggests an alternative conclusion: a sentence of natural language that does not encode a proposition is used to attribute a set of fully specific propositions as the contents of a subject’s mental states.

One objection that might be raised to this account of attitude reports turns on the determination of the propositions expressed by the report. The view is that which propositions are expressed are determined by the context of the utterance of the report. These may not match the propositions the subject believes, or the propositions that they would express by an utterance of the embedded clause in even a very similar context. However, this problem will arise

for single proposition views as well. There is no reason to think that moving to a multiple proposition view makes the problem any more troubling. For example, there are issues that arise with the use of context sensitive language in reports. These issues are no worse for the multiple proposition theorist, and they are free to adopt any proposed solutions e.g. those proposed in Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009). Furthermore, here is no reason to think that it would be any harder to make true attributions of propositional attitude on this model. What is different is that reporters typically say many things; each of these can be assessed for truth or falsity.

8 Conclusion

There is good evidence that natural languages underdetermine what speakers use those languages to express. I have argued that Underdeterminacy has consequences for how philosophers should think about meaning and communication. I have argued for a specific revisionary consequence: that utterances typically express multiple propositions. This is a different revisionary consequence than the one that Buchanan argues for, and preserves more of the traditional theory of communication given in terms of propositions.

Buchanan argues against the standard view using Underdeterminacy as a premise. But rejecting the standard view in the way he does is radically revisionary given the background of theories that think of linguistic meaning and communication in a propositional framework. This might motivate some theorists to reject Underdeterminacy. I have defended an alternative response which revises the standard view but is still propositional. This version of the multiple proposition view is compatible with Underdeterminacy.

In the end, assessing the view defended in this paper will require weighing up the benefits of a theory of communication in terms of propositions against the costs associated with the revisionary consequences of the view. I have tried to show that the revisionary consequences have few costs by giving an account that mirrors the standard view as closely as possible, and departs from it only in ways that can be defended. My conclusion is that the multiple proposition view is therefore relatively uncostly. Abandoning theories of communication based on propositions means getting rid of much more of the recent history of philosophy of language. Therefore, I recommend the multiple proposition view as an alternative.

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