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To cite this version:
Renato Basso. Possible weak demonstratives: a preliminary analysis. René Daval; Pierre Frath; Emilia Hilgert; Silvia Palma. Les théories du sens et de la référence. Hommage à Georges Kleiber, Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims, pp.645-661, 2014, Res per nomen, 9782915271805. hal-01860576

HAL Id: hal-01860576
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01860576
Submitted on 23 Aug 2018

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Possible weak demonstratives: a preliminary analysis

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Introduction: weak definites and their properties

The phenomenon of weak definites has attracted the attention of linguists mainly because it poses serious challenges to one of the most well established consensus about the semantics (and use) of definite articles: the uniqueness (either as an assertion or as a presupposition) associated with it. Examples such as (1) and (2) do not seem to require, at least in Brazilian Portuguese (BrP), a unique referent; they also convey “enriched meanings” – the two most distinguishing features of weak definites (cf. Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts, 2010, Vogel, 2011, among others):

1) Pra chegar até aqui, você tem que pegar o ônibus.
   To arrive until here you have to take the bus.
   ‘To get here, you must take the bus.’
2) Bom, gente, agora vou sair, vou no mercado.
   (i.e. do shopping)
   Well, guys, now I'm leaving, I'm going to the market.
   ‘Well guys, I'm leaving now, I'm going to the market.’

In the literature we find the following properties associated with weak definites, all of them exemplified by the example in (3) below:

a) (apparent) violation of the uniqueness presupposition
b) enriched meaning
c) sloppy identity in elliptical contexts
d) narrow scope
e) lexical restriction
f) compatibility only with modifiers that establish (or result in) subtypes of the nouns they modify

3) João foi para o hospital.
   ‘John went to the hospital’

(a) (apparent) violation of the uniqueness presupposition → the identity of the hospital is irrelevant, and (3) can be used in a context
in which the participants know that there is more than one (salient) hospital.
b) enriched meaning → John went to the hospital to be treated, for healing, or because he works there...
c) sloppy identity in elliptical contexts → John went to the hospital and Mary did too (possibly to different hospitals)
d) narrow scope → Every student was sent to the hospital (distributive interpretation; i.e., the students were sent to different hospitals)
e) lexically restricted → John went to the clinic. – no weak interpretation
f) accepts only modifiers that establish subtypes (or subkinds) of the nouns they modify
   → John went to the mental hospital – weak interpretation is possible
   → John went to the old hospital – no weak interpretation

Although a lot of work has been devoted to the weak definite article, analyzing this phenomenon either as a type of kind-reference (Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts, 2010) or as a type of semantic incorporation (Carlson et al., 2006, Bosch, 2010), no attention has been devoted to the other sort of determiner which has a definite interpretation, namely demonstratives.

As we shall see in the following sections (mainly in “A semantic analyses for demonstrative descriptions”), although there are some controversies about the semantics of demonstratives, we argue that demonstrative and definite descriptions form a class; our evidence is examples such as¹:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>deictic uses</th>
<th>anaphoric uses</th>
<th>descriptive uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) The cat is sleeping (pointing to a cat)</td>
<td>(c) A woman walked in. The woman was smiling</td>
<td>(e) The student who finishes the exam may leave the room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) That cat is sleeping (pointing to a cat)</td>
<td>(d) A woman walked in. That woman smiled to another woman</td>
<td>(f) That student who finishes the exam may leave the room</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that demonstratives and definite descriptions show similar uses and interpretations, it is reasonable to consider them as forming a unified class; the next step is to argue for a unified semantics for them, and this can be done if we take each one as some sort of description and not as referential terms – that is why (among other reasons) we claim that demonstratives are a kind of definite description (cf. King, 2001; Roberts, 2002; Wolter, 2006; Elbourne, 2008, Basso, 2009). So our main question is: can demonstrative descriptions give rise to weak interpretations in the sense that the uniqueness in their use is not (apparently) required?

Based on the following examples, our first answer is ‘no’:

4) Pra chegar até aqui, você tem que pegar esse / aquele ônibus.
   (only one bus)
   ‘To arrive until here you have to take this / that bus.’

5) Bom, gente, agora vou sair, vou nesse / naquele mercado.
   (only one store).
   ‘Well guys, I’m leaving now, I’m going to this / that store.’

6) Maria leu esse / aquele jornal.
   (only one newspaper)
   ‘Maria read this / that newspaper.’

7) João foi pra esse / aquele médico.
   (only one doctor)
   ‘João went to this / that doctor.’

The examples from (4) to (7) have only a strong interpretation (i.e., they refer to specific individuals) and show none of the other properties related to weak interpretations:

8) João foi pra esse / aquele hospital.
   ‘John went to this / that hospital.’

   a) no (apparent) violation of the uniqueness presupposition → there
      is only one (specific) hospital
   b) no enriched meaning → to be treated, for healing...
   c) no sloppy identity in elliptical contexts → ... and Mary did too
      (same hospital)
   d) absence of narrow scope interpretation → Every student was sent
      to this/that hospital (no distributive interpretation)
   e) lexically restricted → does not apply
f) accepts only adjectives that establish subtypes of the nouns they does not apply

Considering the similarities between definites and demonstratives, why can’t demonstrative descriptions (henceforth, DEMD) have weak interpretations in the same way that definite descriptions can? Is there any kind of context in which DEMDs have a weak interpretation? The answers to these questions can improve our understanding of the semantics of demonstratives and also of the phenomenon of weak definite. In fact, as we will argue in the last section, the existence of weak demonstratives is a strong argument in favor of considering the demonstrative in a DEMD as a determiner (i.e., a DP which selects for an NP) combining both in the semantic and syntactic level with an NP, contra Kaplan (1989), Braun (1994), Borg (2000) and Dever (2001), which claim either that DEMD are direct referential terms with no internal composition or that DEMDs are not real syntactic constituents, but a simple demonstrative plus an appositional structure. Before we answer these questions and discuss the issues of the semantic statuses of demonstratives we need to have a theory about weak definites as well as a theory about DEMDs.

In this paper we adopt Aguilar-Guevara & Zwarts’s (2010) theory for weak definites, as shown in the next section, and we treat DEMDs as a type of definite description, which have specific presuppositions associated with them, as proposed by Wolter (2006). Next we will look at demonstrative reference to kinds (in the section “Demonstrative reference to kinds”). After presenting our theoretical assumptions, we shall go back to possible weak demonstratives. In the section “Why not weak demonstratives?” we explain why it seems impossible to normally have weak interpretations with DEMDs, and afterwards we will present a specific context in which it is indeed possible to have weak interpretations with DEMDs and we will also show the reasons why. Finally, we discuss the importance of the existence of weak definites as well as a theory about DEMDs.

We’ll use “demonstrative descriptions” and DEMDs interchangeably.
demonstratives for a theory of DEMDs. Our main conclusions are presented in the “Conclusion”.

Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts’s (2010) theory for weak definites

According to Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts’s (2010) theory, weak definites maintain the uniqueness presupposition associated with definites although not with respect to particular concrete individuals but with respect to kinds\(^3\).

Their analyses involve an instantiation or realization relation \(R\), and a notion of stereotypical usage events \(U\) (which accounts for the enriched meaning associated with weak definites). These ideas can explain, in principle, the main properties of weak definites.

Consider the following sentence:

9) John went to the hospital

According to their analyses we have:

9') \(\exists e[\text{go-to}(e) \land \text{Ag}(e) = \text{John} \land R(\text{Ref}(e) \ ; \ H) \land U(e \ ; \ H)]\)

As the formula in (9') shows, there is no quantification over ‘hospitals’ (\(H\)) but only an instantiation relation applied to the kind ‘hospital’ \(R(\text{Ref}(e) \ ; \ H))\), which is the goal (or theme) of the “going event”; and there is a set of usage (common, typical) events associated with hospital \(U(e \ ; \ H))\), which involves healing or treatment events among others. The absence of quantification can account for the sloppy identity in anaphora as well as for the narrow scope reading. The usage events constraint can account for the lexical restrictions associated with weak readings and also for the fact that only modifiers which results in subkinds can maintain the weak interpretation (as claimed by the authors, usage events can be established only with kinds and/or subkinds).

\(^3\) Although there is a huge and very important literature about kinds, subkinds and prototypes in psychology and cognitive linguistics, (cf. Langacker, 1991, 1999; Rosch, 1978, among many others), we will understand these concepts in the spirit of Carlson (1977) seminal work on bare nouns in English, as well as in Chierchia (1998), Dayal (2004), Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2010) and several other authors in the tradition of formal semantics. Although these concepts are different, they nonetheless have some overlapping.
There are of course more subtleties and further developments of this theory. Be it as it may, to our purposes in this paper, the two most important features of Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts’s (2010) theory are (a) the maintenance of the uniqueness associated with definite descriptions and (b) the assumption that weak interpretations involve kinds and/or subkinds. With a theory which assumes uniqueness and appeals to kinds (and subkinds), in the next section we’ll consider the semantics of demonstratives.

A semantic analysis for demonstrative descriptions

In principle, it is possible to have two different approaches for DEMDs: (i) a direct reference approach, as proposed by Kaplan (1989), Braun (2008), Dever (2001), etc. (note that each author argues for a direct reference approach but their proposals are not the same); and (ii) indirect reference approach, in which the demonstrative can be treated as a quantifier (King, 2001) or as a determiner (Roberts, 2002, Elbourne, 2008, Wolter, 2006).

As expected, all of these approaches have their merits and problems. From a syntactic and semantic point of view, demonstratives are more naturally treated as determiners (for counter-arguments to this, see, e.g., Dever, 2001), alongside with definite descriptions.

Thus, considering Roberts’s (2002), Elbourne’s (2008) and Wolter’s (2006) proposals, we shall adopt the latter because it is more economical and covers a wider range of data.

According to Wolter’s theory, definite and demonstrative descriptions share the same assertion content but differ with

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4 Demonstrative descriptions (also known as complex demonstratives) are expressions composed by a demonstrative and an NP (DEM + NP); this is the only kind of demonstrative constructions that we shall consider in this paper. There are some complicated and interesting issues in trying to extend our considerations to plural DEMDs and also to simple demonstratives (singular and/or plural).

5 A thorough defense of Wolter’s (2006) proposal is not the aim of this paper.
respect to their presuppositions. The only difference between these
descriptions – leaving aside the distal/proximal properties showed
by ‘this’ versus ‘that’ – is that definite descriptions presuppose
uniqueness with respect to a conversational situation or context; *i.e.,*
maximal or default situation, while DEMDs presuppose
uniqueness with respect to a proper subpart of a conversational
situation or context; *i.e.,* not the maximal situation, but a non-
default situation.

To illustrate this point, consider a scenario where there are two
different paintings in an art gallery; in this context, (10) is bad even
with a pointing gesture, and (11), with a pointing gesture, is good:

10) # I like the painting.
11) I like this painting.

In Wolter’s theory the pointing gesture associated with
demonstratives is used to establish a non-default situation. So, in
the scenario above, when someone points to a single painting, a
non-default situation is established in which there is only one
painting (which is the one being pointed to). In this non-default
situation, the use of a DEMD like ‘this painting’ is felicitous exactly
because there is only one painting in the non-default situation – this
scenario satisfies the uniqueness presupposed by the demonstrative
(which is the same as the presupposition associated with the
definite, but which acts in the maximal situation in the case of
definite descriptions).

These intuitions can be apprehended by the formulations below
(Wolter’s definitions p.64):

\[
[[\text{the}_n]]: \lambda P.P(s_n) \text{ is a singleton set.}
\]
\[
\text{If defined, denotes } \iota x.P(x)(s_n)
\]

\[
[[\text{that}_n]]: \lambda P.P(s_n) \text{ is a singleton set and } s_n \text{ is non-default.}
\]
\[
\text{If defined, denotes } \iota x.P(x)(s_n)
\]

---

6 In BrP, ‘esse/este’ (proximal) *versus* ‘aquele’ (distal). We consider that in
spoken BrP there is no more difference between ‘esse’ and ‘este’, although
these items are still used differently in written BrP.

7 Even if (10) is accepted in this context, there is a clear preference for
using (11).
Wolter’s theory is naturally extended to deal with non-referential uses of demonstratives, as anaphoric and descriptive uses. Our next step is to understand the relation between demonstratives and kind reference, considering that, in accordance with Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts’s (2010) theory, reference to kinds (or subkinds) is necessary in order to have weak interpretations.

**Demonstrative reference to kinds**

DEMDs cannot normally be used to refer to kinds, as the example (12) shows, but it is natural to use DEMDs to refer to subkinds, as in example (13) (at least in Brazilian Portuguese; for the same considerations and conclusions concerning English demonstratives, cf. Bowdle & Ward, 1995):

**Pointing to a whale:**

12) A baleia tá em extinção OK-kind
   the whale is in extinction
   ‘The whale is in extinction.’
13) Essa baleia/Aquela baleia tá em extinção OK-subkind
   this whale/ that whale is in extinction
   ‘This whale/ that whale is in extinction.’

(12) can mean something like whale is in extinction or something like a subkind of whales is in extinction; but (13) can only mean that a subkind of whales is in extinction, i.e. the one (subkind) being pointed to or represented by the one (whale) being pointed to.

Consider now another example (“K” is for kind and “SK” is for subkind – a kind interpretation would be something like “Dogs are friendly” and a subkind interpretation, “Golden retrievers are friendly”); pointing to a golden retriever, someone some of the sentences below:
The only way to refer to a kind using DEMDs is when the NP position in the description is filled with a “superordinate term”, e.g. ‘animal’. In such a context, dog is a sub-kind of animal. The important point is that the demonstrative does not refer to the maximum individual (the top of the taxonomy). We propose that the restrictions of the kind reference displayed by DEMDs is due to the semantics of the demonstrative: to refer to kinds, it is necessary to have the maximal situation, with no further restrictions; but, as proposed by Wolter, demonstratives impose a restriction: they work only on non-default situations, and that is why we cannot normally use DEMDs to refer to kinds, but only to sub-kinds in a taxonomy. In the case of ‘animal’, the taxonomy has at the top the term ‘animal’ and ‘dog’ is then an item below it.

So far, we presented a theory for weak definites which preserves the uniqueness presupposition associated with definites, we argued that demonstratives are a kind of definite which shows specific presupposition (i.e., uniqueness in a non-default situation), and we also showed that demonstrative reference to kinds is not free from certain restrictions; we claimed that these restrictions have to do with the semantics of the demonstratives which allows them to refer to subkinds but not to kinds (only when the NP position is filled with a “superordinate term”). In the next section we return to the possibilities of weak interpretations for DEMDs with the theoretical assumptions seen so far.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEM + “superordinate term”</th>
<th>DEM description</th>
<th>DEF description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Esse animal é amigável*K, aSK</td>
<td>Esse cachorro é amigável*K, aSK</td>
<td>O cachorro é amigável*K, aSK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This animal is friendly</td>
<td>This dog is friendly</td>
<td>The dog is friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esse tipo de animal é amigável*K, aSK</td>
<td>Esse tipo de cachorro é amigável*K, aSK</td>
<td># O tipo de cachorro é amigável*K, aSK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This kind of animal is friendly</td>
<td>This kind of dog is friendly</td>
<td>The kind of dog is friendly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why not weak demonstratives?

The reason why it is impossible to have weak interpretations of DEMDs is that we need reference to kind to have weak interpretations (according to Aguilar-Guevera and Zwarts’s (2010) proposal), but demonstratives are always restricted to smaller domains (i.e., non-default situations) in comparison to the definite description and therefore cannot refer to kinds; since demonstratives cannot refer to kinds (because kind reference works only in maximal or default situations), the only option left for the demonstratives is to refer to instantiations (or “regular individuals”), and so we do not have weak interpretations with DEMDs.

Consider the following illustration for the example (8), repeated below:

8) João foi pra esse/aquele hospital
   João go past to this/that hospital
   ‘John went to this/that hospital.’

As the illustration shows, the item ‘hospital’ in example (8) can, in principle, refer to kind-level or individual-level entities. Weak interpretations need access to the kind-level but, since demonstratives, due to their semantics, cannot have access to the kind-level, the only option left is the individual-level and that is why sentence (8) refers to a specific/particular hospital.

But, as we propose in the next section, there is a particular type of context in which demonstratives can have weak interpretations.

No weak demonstratives at all?
In order to describe the contexts in which we argue that it is possible to have a weak interpretation with DEMDs, consider the two conclusions we arrived at so far: (i) although DEMDs can refer to subkinds by pointing to instantiations if the right contextual conditions are fulfilled, they can refer to kinds only under specific restrictions (i.e., when combined with an "empty name", as in ‘this kind of animal’); and (ii) although weak interpretations do not accept all types of modifiers, they do accept modifiers which result in subtypes or subkinds.

Putting these two ideas together, maybe there are some cases in which DEMDs can have weak interpretations. Consider the sentence (14) below, a well-behaved weak definite with a modifier:

14) João ligou pro médico do coração / de pele / do olho  
João call past the doctor of the heart/of skin/of the eye  
‘John called the heart/skin/eye doctor.’

Imagine now a context in which there is a list showing the names of medical specialties, and Peter, reporting what John did, says (15), while pointing to the label ‘dermatology’ (‘skin doctor’):

15) João chamou esse médico.  
João call past this doctor.  
‘John called this doctor.’

In the suggested context, (15) has the main properties of “regular” or “ordinary” weak definites:

15) John called this doctor and Mary did it too.  
⇒ OK if they did not call the same doctor, but doctors which have the same medical specialty, namely skin doctors (i.e., they may have called different skin doctors)  
⇒ enriched meaning: called for medical assistance  
⇒ narrow scope: Every student called this doctor (i.e., every student called the skin doctor, but most likely different ones)

But what happened in this case? Our suggestion is that we establish, via contextual information (i.e., by pointing to a list of

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* It is far from easy to define subkinds and taxonomies; in this paper, we follow Dayal (2004).
* Of course, this sentence (i.e., the construction ‘this doctor’) should be said while point to the label “dermatology” in the table shown above.
medical specialties), a taxonomy of subkinds, as the next illustration shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kinds</th>
<th>DOCTOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>subkinds</td>
<td>heart-doc. skin-doc. eye-doc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instantiations</td>
<td>d1 d2 d3 d4 d5 d6...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this configuration, there are salient subkinds accessible and the DEMDs may refer to them, giving rise to a weak interpretation. Compare this illustration with the one associated to example (8) — in that illustration there are no subkinds accessible\(^\text{10}\).

In short, our claim is that in the context given for example (15) the use of the demonstrative description with a proper pointing gesture has exactly the same effect of the modifier which combined with definite descriptions results in a subkind.

For another example of this type of context, consider the following scenario, which summarized the press political tendencies from a small kingdom. In this kingdom, each newspaper falls neatly into one of three political tendencies: leftist (4 different newspapers), center (3 different newspapers), and rightist (3 different newspapers). The table below summarizes this scenario, by sorting the newspapers into three columns (the traces (----) stand for the newspapers’ names):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEWSPAPERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pointing to the left-hand column, Mary says:

16) João vai ler esse jornal e Maria também.

João go PRES to read this newspaper and Mary too

\(^{10}\) This doesn’t mean, of course, that there are not subkinds of hospitals, but only that the example in (8) did not make them available and/or relevant, so they are not accessible to DEMDs.
'John will read this newspaper, and Mary will do that too.'

Again, in this context, the weak interpretation is prominent and we claim that the reason for this is that we have established and have access to subkinds of newspapers, and given that the DEMD ('this newspaper') can refer not only to a specific individual but also to a subkinds (i.e., left-hand newspaper no matter which one) it is possible to have a weak interpretation. Reference to subkinds guarantees weak interpretations.

In short, demonstratives cannot have access to kind-level individual because its domain is always smaller compared to the definite, but they can have access to subkind-level individuals; when there is no salient subkinds available, the only alternative for DEMDs is to refer to instantiations (individual-level). That is the reason why without a (contextually salient) taxonomy of subkinds there are no weak demonstratives (‘*w’ stands for ‘no weak interpretation’):

17) *w João foi pra esse hospital.
    João went to this/that hospital
18) *w João limpou essa/aquela garrafa azul.
    João cleaned this/that bottle blue

Unless a taxonomy of hospitals and/or blue bottles is in the common-background there are no weak interpretations available.

We are not claiming that these examples are the “best” sentences ever, but only that, given the semantics of the demonstrative we adopted, combined with Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts’s (2010) analysis, the only way to have weak demonstratives is establishing a taxonomy of subkinds.

Weak demonstratives and the semantics of the demonstrative

As we said in the Introduction, the existence of weak demonstratives (and, as a matter of fact, of generic demonstratives) can be seen as evidence against theories which claim that DEMDs are devices of direct reference as proposed by Kaplan (1989).

Since Kaplan’s pioneering work, the NP component of DEMD is something that should be explained away: since DEMDs are
devices of direct reference they cannot have any internal composition and the NP that appears in them, somehow, should not be part of the proposition expressed by a sentence which contain a DEMD. In fact, Kaplan claimed at an early stage that the role of this NP is just to help the audience to get to the intended referent. This idea can be implemented as saying that in DEMDs the NP acts only on the Kaplanian character, but not on the content, in this way, the NP is not a propositional constituent. We can find some echoes of these ideas in the work of Braun (1994) and Borg (2000). This alternative is not an ideal one because it clearly violates semantic innocence (the principle that says that the semantic behavior of any given expression be the same regardless of the context in which it appears).

Another alternative proposed by a referentialist about DEMDs is to claim that in a DEMD the demonstrative and the NP does not form a constituent. This bold alternative is fully embraced and advocated by Dever (2001); he claims that the NP in a DEMD is an appositive constituent and as so does not appear in the same proposition as the demonstrative, but in a secondary / auxiliary proposition as is the case with other appositives.

However, it seems very difficult to defend any of these proposals in the face of the data shown here. There is a striking parallel behavior with respect to kind reference and generic interpretation when one compares definite and demonstrative descriptions. It is true that there is a contrast between these two constructions, as we claim, in the sense that DEMD can never refer to kinds, but only to subkinds in a given taxonomy structure (or, in others words, always to smaller domain with respect to the definite description). But the point is that in these two descriptions the NP seems to be doing exactly the same, to be playing the same role, and both descriptions do not only have generic interpretation, but also weak interpretations, which makes them even more similar.

Conclusion

In this paper, our point of starting was a theory for weak definites which preserves the uniqueness presupposition commonly
associated with definites and which claims that weak interpretations involve reference to kinds. Our aim was to analyze weak interpretation with DEMDs because these descriptions show important similarities with definite ones. We presented and adopted a theory for demonstrative descriptions which claims that their semantics is closely related to the semantics of the definite description and that they differ not with respect to their assertion content but with respect to their presuppositions.

Then we investigated demonstrative reference to kinds because the theory for weak interpretation that we adopted explains the relevant data appealing to kind reference. When we put together all these considerations we can explain the facts concerning the possibilities of weak interpretation with DEMDs.

In our proposal for the existence and constraints concerning weak interpretations for DEMDs we can accommodate, without drastic modifications in the major picture of weak definites, the absence of weak demonstratives (which happens when there is no access to the subkind-level), on the one hand, and the instances of weak demonstratives (which happen when there is access to the subkind-level), on the other hand.

The semantic analysis proposed for demonstratives in this paper also explains why demonstrative descriptions do not usually refer to kinds and why they denote only subkinds or (specific) individuals. Our analysis can also be used as a further argument against the treatment of DEMDs as devices of direct reference and claims that definite and demonstrative descriptions form a natural class.

Finally, our analysis highlights the role of taxonomies and domain restriction in the understanding of noun phrases weak interpretations and can be seen as an argument in favor of Aguilar-Guevera and Zwarts’s (2010) proposal.

11 It should also be clear that this is a first approximation on this topic and that more research will have to be done, including a corpus research and a crosslinguistic one.
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