Colloquial Singapore English Particle *What* and the (Un)Common Ground

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1. <u>Introduction</u> While the discourse particles of Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) have been studied from a functional perspective (Gupta, 1992), few attempts have been made to formalise these particles' semantic denotations. Drawing from recent work on the interaction between particles and speech act semantics, this paper presents novel data on the distribution of the sentence-final particle *what* /wʌʔ/ and proposes a formalism within Update Semantics to model its effect on the Conversational Scoreboard. I argue that *what* is a speech act operator which asserts that the declarative assertion that *what* is sentence-finally appended to, or one of a preceding speech act's projected propositions, is already in the Stalnakerian (2002) Common Ground (CG). **2. <u>Data</u>** The primary characteristics of *what* are as follows:

(1) a. used to declare a given proposition as 'obvious' or known
  b. appended sentence-finally to a declarative assertion the speaker believes is true
  c. sensitive to the state of the world the discourse takes place in
  d. questions the utility or motivation of a preceding speech act

The particle *what* can be used in response to either questions or declaratives:

(2) *Context: A and B are friends with John.*
  A: Is John coming to the party?
  B: John is overseas *what*.

(3) *Context: A and B are friends.*
  A: I wish I were good looking.
  B: But you are *what*.

In (2), B implies 'John is not coming', emphasising that A should have known that John was overseas, as in (1a). In (3), B explicitly objects to the implicature in A's propositional attitude report that 'A is not good looking,' questioning why A is wishing for something already (obviously) true. The declarative assertion *what* attaches to must be (believed by B to be) true of the world the discourse takes place in, as in (1b): B in (3) cannot be sarcastic. As in (1c), *what*'s felicity is context-sensitive, demonstrated by the following minimal pair:

(4) *Context: B knows that A is an art historian with no interest in Chemistry.*
  A: Is there anything interesting to see in Paris?
  B: The Louvre/#Louis Pasteur's house is there *what*.

(5) *Context: B knows that A is a chemist with no interest in art.*
  A: Is there anything interesting to see in Paris?
  B: Louis Pasteur's house/#The Louvre is there *what*.

In (4)-(5), the felicitous responses imply that 'Yes, there is something interesting to see in Paris', indicating also surprise that A is asking the question given that A should already possess the information they are requesting. However, the relevant 'something interesting' and felicity of *what* is swapped in (4)-(5), depending on A's differing occupation; i.e. a fact about the world of the discourse. This is because B's expectations of what A should know change depending on their knowledge of A. Finally, *what* questions the information-seeking utility of interrogatives like (2) and (4), given that A should already know the information sought, and the validity of A's wish in (3), exemplifying (1d). **3. <u>Update Semantics</u>** Following Horn (2012), given that interlocutors can interpret the same conversational move differently, I argue that the CG cannot be the simple intersection of speakers public discourse commitments as in Farkas & Bruce (2010:88). I thus follow Allan (2001:21), whose definition allows for mismatches between speakers' perceptions of the CG:

(6) ϕ is common ground for any community K of two or more people if:
  a. every (or almost every) member of K knows/believes some (set of) fact(s) ϕ;
  b. a member is presumed to know/believe ϕ by (almost) every other member of K;
  c. a member of K knows that both (a) and (b) are true.

Additionally, I adopt aspects of the Conversational Scoreboard model proposed and modified by Farkas & Bruce and Malamud & Stephenson (2014:7), where a context c comprises a Common Ground (CG_c), as described as ϕ in (6), a Table (T_c), referring to the stack of propositions to be resolved over the course of conversation, and Projected Common Ground(s) (CG^*_c), the set of potential CGs that may be realised at the next stage of conversation based on resolutions to issues on the Table. The CG is not updated directly, but through proposals on the Table that can be confirmed or denied (Ginzburg, 1996). Additionally, I adopt the stack operation ***push(e,T)***, which represents the new stack obtained by adding item e to the top of stack T. **4. _What_'s Semantics** Building on Law et al.'s (2018) speech act operators **assert** and **quest**, I propose the following formalism for _what_:

   (7) $c + what(p)_{w,s_c} = {<}CG_c, \textbf{push}(\{\{w' \mid p(w')\} \subseteq CG_c\},T_c){>}$
        defined only if s_c believes p is true in w

Here, _what_ proposes that its argument proposition (p) is already in the CG_c via the use of a subset relation.[1] This accounts for the primary function of _what_ in (1a) as declaring a proposition to be known or obvious. For the proposal to be defined, the speaker must believe (p) to be true in w, accounting for the sincerity condition in (1b), inherent in (3). The two ways in which the operator _what_ selects the argument it takes are as follows: Firstly, (p) can be the declarative assertion _what_ is explicitly appended to. Formalising B's response in (2):

   (8) $c + what([[\text{John is overseas}]])_{w,B} = {<}CG_c, \textbf{push}(\{\{w' \mid \text{John is overseas in w'}\} \subseteq CG_c\},T_c){>}$, defined only if B believes John is overseas in w

Thus, B asserts that the proposition 'John is overseas' was assumed to be common knowledge in the discourse context. A second possibility is that _what_ takes as its argument one of the propositions projected by the preceding speech act. Following Karttunen (1977) and Law et al., polar questions add to the Table both p and $\neg p$. Thus, A's question in (2) pushes both $CG_c \cap \{\text{w' } \mid \text{ John is coming in w'}\}$ and $CG_c \cap \{\text{w' } \mid \text{ John is not coming in w'}\}$ onto T_c. I argue that _what_ may take one of these two proposed CG*s as its argument:

   (9) $c + what([[\text{John is not coming}]])_{w,B} =$
        ${<}CG_c, \textbf{push}(\{\{w' \mid \text{John is not coming in w'}\} \subseteq CG_c\},T_c){>}$
        defined only if B believes John is not coming in w

Here, _what_ proposes that the projected CG* containing $\neg p$ is already a subset of the current CG. The dual possibilities of (8) and (9) allow (7) to account for the asserted obviousness of **both** the literal meaning of B's utterance ('John is overseas') and its implicature ('John is not coming'). This also holds for (4), where _what_ not only underscores the obviousness of the proposition that [[the Louvre is in France]], but also the p projected by the preceding question that [[there is something interesting to see in Paris]]. Like other conversational updates, (7) can be explicitly rejected or confirmed. A can respond 'I didn't know John was overseas' in (2) to informatively assert (p) is not in the CG and reject _what_'s projection. Alternatively, in (4) A could non-redundantly confirm (p) is in the CG by responding 'Yeah, but the Louvre is overrated', justifying the motivation behind their question. **5. References** Allan (2001) Natural language semantics. Farkas & Bruce (2010) On reacting to assertions and polar questions. Ginzburg (1996) Dynamics and the semantics of dialogue. Gupta (1992) The pragmatic particles of Singapore Colloquial English. Horn (2012) Implying and inferring. Karttunen (1977) Syntax and semantics of questions. Law, Li, & Bhadra (2018) Questioning Speech Acts. Malamud & Stephenson (2014) Three ways to avoid commitments: Declarative force modifiers in the conversational scoreboard. Stalnaker (2002) Common Ground.

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[1](7) is evaluated relative to different contextually-determined parameters, such as subscript s_c (the utterance speaker) and w (the world in which the utterance occurs). The latter directly encodes _what_'s sensitivity to the discourse context, as in (1c), accounting for (4)-(5).