

Normative generics: Against semantic polysemy

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Abstract

Generic sentences are sometimes characterized as normative or descriptive. Descriptive generics make generalized claims about things: *dogs bark*, *birds fly*, *doughnuts have holes*. Normative generics do something more complicated; they seem to communicate how things *should* be: *boys don't cry*, *children are seen and not heard*, *friends don't let friends drive drunk*. The latter set of sentences express something like the speaker's endorsement that the predicated terms match up with the kind terms. Sarah-Jane Leslie posits a semantic view of normative generics on which the subject term is polysemous between a normative and a descriptive reading. I argue that this cannot be right, and show how a Gricean implicature view can accommodate everyday normative generics in a way that Leslie's polysemous view cannot. An upshot of my argument is skepticism about drawing semantic conclusions from dual character concepts.

KEYWORDS

dual character concepts, generics, normative generics, polysemy, pragmatics

1 | NORMATIVE GENERICS

Call a generic sentence normative if an assertion of it (a) expresses some sort of norm involving the subject of the generic statement and (b) endorses that norm (Haslanger, 2014; Leslie, 2015; McConnell-Ginet, 2012). It is generally held that there is a distinction between normative and descriptive generics, although the line between the two is admittedly blurry. For the purposes

of this paper, I will grant that there is such a distinction and maintain that a theory of generics should be able to predict why and when indefinite singular readings of normative generics are available. Examples of normative generic sentences include: *boys don't cry*, *children are seen and not heard*, *friends don't let friends drive drunk*. Assertions of 'boys don't cry' seem to express a norm that boys should not cry, and communicate the speaker's approval of this norm.

There is some sort of important difference between the generics *boys are children* and *boys don't cry*. One way to identify the difference is to call the former expression descriptive and the latter normative. Someone may assert 'boys don't cry' knowing that sentence does not map on to (or represent) the world in the same way that 'boys are children' does. The sentence conveys more (and sometimes less) than descriptive information about the world.¹

According to Sarah-Jane Leslie, a generic sentence like *boys don't cry* is normative by way of having a 'hortatory force' (Leslie, 2015). That is, assertions of normative generic statements can serve as encouragements or admonitions of certain (relevant) behavior. When I say 'winners never quit' to a student, I am encouraging her not to quit, or admonishing her for quitting, or praising her for continuing not to quit in the face of adversity. Similarly, Sally McConnell-Ginet (2012) says of normative generics: "speakers uttering sentences like those... are usually urging their addressees to act so as to make the actual world more like an 'ideal' world of which these sentences could truly be uttered descriptively—for example, to do their part to make it descriptively accurate to say that boys don't cry" (p. 273). In these regards, normative generic sentences differ importantly from descriptive generic sentences.

Sally Haslanger (2014) discusses another feature of normative generic sentences: the way they influence and reflect the social world. For example, a normative generic like *women stay home with their children* can be used "to back social norms: women *ought* to stay home with their babies..." Haslanger also explains how assertions of normative generics endorse norms. When one says that Fs are Gs in the relevant generic normative sense, this implicates "that it is right and good for Fs to be G, and Fs that are not G are defective" (Haslanger, 2014, p. 14).

A third way in which normative generics differ from their descriptive counterparts is that normative generic sentences are not assigned truth-conditions in the same way that descriptive generic sentences are. For example, the generic *boys don't cry* is not judged true or false in the same way that *boys are children* is. Instead, its truth conditions—if it has any—are closer to those of the sentence *boys ought not cry*. As Leslie (2015) tells us, these kinds of generics "do not seem to express any kind of inductive generalization about the empirical world," and "seem to be unresponsive to the actual distribution of the property among the members of the kind" (p. 113). That is, a normative assertion of *boys don't cry* does not seem to depend on whether, descriptively, boys actually do not cry. Rather, it expresses some sort of normative ideal or standard according to which boys don't cry (Haslanger, 2014; Leslie, 2015).

2 | DUAL-CHARACTER CONCEPTS

Leslie (2015) proposes a semantic view of normative generics on which the subject term of the generic is polysemous between a normative and a descriptive reading. The normative force of normative generics comes from the *dual character concepts* of the subject terms, following Knobe et al. (2013). A word like 'boy', for example, has two readings: a normative and a descriptive one. When we utter a generic statement like 'boys don't cry', we invoke the normative reading of 'boy.' Importantly, this distinction is a semantic one. 'Boy' (and other terms that

can be read normatively) is two-way polysemous: there is the normative ‘boy’ (exemplifying the ideals associated with ‘boy’), and the descriptive ‘boy’ (what a boy is like).²

For Knobe and Prasada, the dual character of a concept *x* is captured by the appropriateness of saying: “There is a sense in which [someone] is clearly an [*x*], but ultimately, if you think about what it really means to be an [*x*], you would have to say that she is not an [*x*] at all” (Knobe & Prasada, 2011, p. 2965). Knobe and Prasada hypothesized and found that cases in which the above statement schema was appropriate yielded “two distinct ways of characterizing category members: one based on concrete features, the other based on what we have been calling ‘abstract values,’” where the category of abstract values revealed a “normative dimension” to the category (pp. 2965–2966). So, for example, when the sentence schema was successfully applied to a concept like “scientist,” speakers tended to think of the concept *scientist* in two ways: first, as associated with concrete features and activities like “a talent for theory, experimental design, statistical analysis” (p. 2966). Second, and more normatively, is the way of thinking about a scientist as someone who might “embody, in their whole way of life, the broader values associated with the scientific enterprise” (p. 2966). This person would be a “true scientist,” and this latter reading would be the normative reading. The availability of the two readings of *scientist* makes *scientist* a dual character concept.

So, according to Knobe and Prasada, certain terms—like *artist* and *scientist*, and unlike *bartender* and *table of contents*—have two readings: a descriptive reading and a normative, ideal reading. Leslie then applies this insight to normative language, including but not limited to normative generics. According to Leslie, a statement like ‘Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration’ invokes the normative reading of ‘man.’ Such normative expressions, including normative generics, reveal the underlying polysemy of these kinds of terms. So, a normative generic like *boys don’t cry* just says something characteristic of the ideal notion of *boy*. But it seems like we can also generate normative readings of generics like *a bicycle has multiple gears* (said with disdain about a fixie) or *bartenders don’t get drunk on the job*, and that we would resist positing dual characters for ‘bicycle’ and ‘bartender’. The next section fleshes out this observation into an objection.

3 | AGAINST SEMANTIC POLYSEMY

Note that Leslie’s polysemous view of generics, on which the predicate term of the generic is polysemous, relies on the following premise: if a normative generic statement can arise, then the concept in question is a dual-character concept. “Pairs of [descriptive and normative] generics can arise only if the concept in question has a dual character” (Leslie, 2015, p. 118). So, the normative force of the generic is explained by the fact that in a sentence like *boys don’t cry*, the normative meaning of ‘boy’ is salient. ‘Boys don’t cry’ means *ideal boys don’t cry*.

Here’s why this won’t work. There are many contexts in which one can generate a normative generic that contains concepts that (a) do not qualify as dual-character concepts; and (b) have no immediate polysemous reading.³ Consider a context in which I am caring for my child, *S*, in the early hours of the morning. She puts pebbles in her mouth and I take them out. She goes for a bigger pebble. I give her a knowing look and say:

(1) Rocks aren’t breakfast.

There is something distinctly hortatory about this generic. *Do not eat that rock*. Rocks are not for eating. Rocks should not be for breakfast. And yet, there is no sense of “rock” that I am evoking such that a polysemous view can explain the normativity of (1). In uttering (1), I am not saying that “ideal rocks are not breakfast.” I am saying that these very mundane rocks are not for breakfast, including the one that S is about to test as the counterexample to my claim.⁴

Knobe et al. 's (2013) data is robust. Some concepts are found to evoke a normative reading, and some do not. But, as I argue, concepts that do not evoke normative readings can be perfectly fit for normative generics. Consider some of the concepts that were found *not* to yield normative readings, on the part of Knobe and Prasada: *bus driver*, *pharmacist*, *second cousin*. These, too, can feature in normative generics, in the right context. Consider the following cases:

3.1 | Bus stop romance

Lois's mother married the driver of her regular bus route. She was always the last one off the bus, and would linger and make pleasant conversation with the driver. One day she was late. She ran to the stop, thinking she would catch the next bus. There he was, waiting, much to the annoyance of the other passengers, who said things like (2) and (3) to themselves and the oblivious driver.⁵

- (2) Bus drivers stick to their timetables.
- (3) Bus drivers don't wait for their favorite passengers.

3.2 | Pharmacist

Andy is a pharmacist whose manager catches her filling her own prescription. This is against code. The manager says:

- (4) Pharmacists don't fill their own prescriptions.

3.3 | Bartender

Sitting at the bar, Mira decides to buy her bartender a drink. Flattered, but cognizant of her responsibilities on a bustling Friday night, the bartender says:

- (5) Bartenders don't drink on the job.⁶

The generic sentences (2)–(5), uttered in context, are like Leslie's central example of *boys don't cry*. Just as *boys don't cry* hortatorily expresses “boys shouldn't cry,” these examples communicate what sorts of things bus drivers, pharmacists, and bartenders should not do. According to the research findings of Knobe and Prasada, these categories do not exhibit dual character concepts. And so by Leslie's lights, they do not admit of felicitous normative generic readings. Yet, they do. The normative readings of generics (1)–(5) tell against a polysemous semantic view of normative generics.

4 | THE SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS OF NORMATIVE GENERICS

In Section 3, I showed how the highly context-sensitive nature of normative generics allows for the felicitous utterance of normative generics containing members of categories that do not exhibit dual-character concepts. This is data that we need to take into account when considering an overarching view of normative generics. Sentences (1–5) tell against a *polysemous* semantic view of normative generics, but do not rule out semantic theories more broadly. Pragmatic views like Haslanger's (2011, 2014), McConnell-Ginet (2012), and Nguyen (2020) more easily accommodate this context-sensitivity, but so can semantic views like Sterken (2012, 2015), Nickel (2016), and meta-semantic views like Krifka (2012).⁷ Sterken (2015, p. 27) leaves open the possibility of a Gricean pragmatic account of the complexity of generics, and Haslanger (2014) considers a Gricean implicature view of normative generics. In what follows, I use an analogous case to show how a Gricean implicature view can accommodate sentences 1–5 in a way that Leslie's polysemous view cannot.⁸ This section aims to show that Gricean pragmatic views of normative generics can accommodate the normativity of sentences 1–5.

Let us return to the endless struggle about the rocks. Suppose I have already established—or at least take myself to have established—that S may eat foodstuffs for breakfast, but not rocks. In fact, I have brought out some apples for this express purpose. She considers the apples, and picks up a rock anyway. I give her the same look as the one in Section 3 and say to her:

(6) That is a rock.

Sentence (6), uttered in the right context and with the right tone, can convey something very similar to sentence (1). *Don't eat that rock*. And yet, semantically, “that is a rock” just means that is a rock. Fully arguing that the normative force of (6) comes from the pragmatics and not the semantics is beyond the scope of this paper, but I hope the reader will afford me this analogy.⁹

A speaker in a context like the one above can utter (6) and communicate something normative: namely, that S is not supposed to eat that rock, or more generally, that rocks ought not be eaten. Call the communicated content:

(7) S should not eat that rock.

The normativity of (6) does not seem to be located in the semantics. At least, it would be extremely difficult to locate the normativity in the semantics. Compositionally speaking, “that,” “is,” “a,” and “rock” do not lend themselves to normative readings.

The context is analogous to one where the speaker utters (1), “rocks aren't for breakfast.” If the normative force of (6) is to be given a pragmatic explanation, then the normative force of (1) should, as well. If nothing else, the explanatory burden falls on the semantic theorist of normative generics to explain otherwise. And as we have seen in Section 3, the most prominent such theory cannot accommodate (1), along with a wide variety of other normative generics. So, at least one argument by analogy points to pragmatic considerations for the normativity of normative generics.¹⁰

What pragmatic theory might we point to, then? Treating sentences (1) and (6) in tandem suggests something like the following Gricean picture: asserting (1) and (6) in the given context seems to be flouting the maxims of quantity and manner: be as informative as possible, giving

as much information as is needed and no more (quantity); and be as clear, brief, and orderly as possible, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity (Grice, 1975; Mey, 2001).¹¹ S already knows that rocks aren't breakfast (or any meal, for that matter), and that she is holding a rock. My utterance of (1) and (6) does not give her new information. If anything, I am being redundant, thus flouting the maxim of quantity. If, as established, I mean to convey "rocks are not to be eaten," I am also flouting the maxim of quantity. "That is a rock" and "rocks aren't breakfast" are oblique ways of communicating (7). So, what is going on?

Perhaps I want to say something incontrovertible. Perhaps I am sick of saying (7) over and over again, to no effect. Perhaps, following Langton (2017), I want to get (7) into the common ground indirectly, where it will be harder to resist, and in a manner that makes it more difficult to block. Perhaps, as observed by Nickel (2012), "it may be even more effective to leave the demand implicit," making it less likely that my demand will be opposed (p. 295). These suggestions, all of which are consistent with a Gricean picture, circle back nicely to some of the original data points motivating the difficulty of parsing normative generics.

Consider the familiar sentence, *boys don't cry*, uttered by someone who thinks boys should not cry. Saying "boys don't cry" is a convenient way to avoid having to argue for the more explicit claim: boys should not cry. It avoids arguing for it because it assumes it. And, like much ideological language, the speaker who is uttering it has a vested interest in getting the sentiment into the common ground as quickly and authoritatively as possible (Haslanger, 2005, 2011; Langton, 2017; Saul, 2017, among others).

But notice, normative generics, while extremely prevalent in ideological discourse, are not *limited* to ideological discourse. One observation is that the normative generics that are prevalent in ideological discourse pattern more systematically and robustly than the normative generics that are more mundane and everyday.¹² The latter seem to be more context-sensitive than the former. Perhaps a failure of a Gricean view of normative generics is that it neglects to consider the robustness of the former. And perhaps one mistake that underlies the failure of Leslie's (2015) theory is an exclusive focus on the role generics play in ideological discourse, at the expense of noticing more mundane uses like (1)–(5). When ultimately adjudicating a complete theory of normative generics, we should consider both how well the theory can accommodate (a) all kinds of normative generic data, and (b) the robustness of ideological normative generics. So far, I have shown that a Gricean view can do (a), but not (b). A full picture of normative generics, however, will require thinking about normative generics across a variety of contexts.

I have argued that, given the availability of normative generic readings for a wide variety of kind terms in a wide variety of contexts, a semantic account of polysemy cannot be right. I have also shown, in arguing this, that a variety of normative generic claims can be made about members of categories that experimentally and intuitively do not exhibit dual character concept. This is a strong reason to be skeptical of treating dual character concepts as semantically informative. I will leave it to future work to evaluate this claim more thoroughly.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ A variety of sentences are candidates for being called ‘normative generics’. I will concern myself with generics of the form *Fs are Gs* or *an F is G* that are implicitly, rather than explicitly, normative. That is, there does not seem to be much in the sentences themselves that is an indicator of normative or hortatory force. I am most interested in these generics for the purpose of this paper because they most closely resemble descriptive generics, yet seem to convey something more. In the rest of the paper, I try to flesh out what this “something more” amounts to.
- ² Leslie gives us a way of understanding the polysemy in terms of lexical entries: “The most natural model would seem to involve positing polysemy—that dual character concepts give rise to lexical entries that have distinct, though related, senses—in this case a descriptive sense and a normative sense. Roughly, and as a first pass, we can understand the normative sense of “man” in terms of the predicate “one who exemplifies the ideals of manhood”; more generally for the limited purposes of this paper, the normative sense of “K” can be understood as: exemplifier of the ideals associated with being a K” (2015, p. 116)
- ³ See Sterken (2015) on the context-sensitivity of generics more broadly.
- ⁴ Perhaps sentence (1) is more naturally heard as “rocks aren’t for breakfast.” To avoid the worry that the normative force comes from the “is not for x” locution, I have used a somewhat less natural phrasing. I thank an anonymous referee for this concern and suggestion. Compare: *Silly Rabbit, Trix are for kids!* from the 1960s and 1970s television commercials for Trix cereal, which also does not rely on a polysemous reading of *Trix*.
- ⁵ This story is adapted from Evaristo (2019).
- ⁶ More naturally, we could imagine the bartender saying, “I’d love to, but bartenders do not drink on the job.” Alternatively, we can modify the a scenario so that the bartender accepts the offer and has a pint with Mira. The bar manager might then catch her drinking and say (5). In both cases, (5) is a normative generic that communicates “bartenders should not drink on the job.”
- ⁷ See also Collins (2018), Tessler and Goodman (2016), Cohen (2012), and Pietroski (2003) for recent pragmatic views. Nickel (2012) identifies McConnell-Ginet’s view as a pragmatic view, although McConnell-Ginet herself seems agnostic about this (p. 272, footnote 11).
- ⁸ Note that this section does not contain a full argument for a pragmatic view; that would be beyond the scope of this paper. In addition, a pragmatic (or any theory) of normative generics would have to explain why many normative readings of generics are robust and systematic. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
- ⁹ Nickel (2012) similarly observes that *boys don’t cry*, uttered in a context where you want your interlocutor, a boy, to stop crying, conveys the same thing as *stop crying!* “The conversational effect of (8) is really no different than that of (6)” (p. 296). See Nguyen (2020) for a similar argument that generics are semantically incomplete until filled in by the context.
- ¹⁰ See McConnell-Ginet (2012) for neighboring worries about a semantic theory of generics.
- ¹¹ See Haslanger (2011, 2014) for a discussion of a Gricean view of normative generics.
- ¹² I thank an anonymous referee for this point.

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