

“Real Men”: Polysemy or Implicature? ¹

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One recurring theme in this volume’s impressively detailed discussion of slurs and the like concerns the extent to which one should appeal to pragmatic rather than semantic factors in giving an account of the linguistic phenomena under consideration.

My treatment of statements such as “Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration” simply set aside pragmatic, implicature-based accounts. Instead, I argued that such statements exploit lexical polysemy, of a sort that attaches to terms when we associate ‘dual character concepts’ with them, in the sense of Knobe and Prasada (2011, submitted). The notion of a dual character concept is nicely illustrated by Knobe and Prasada’s discussion of *scientists*: one might deem that a professional physicist who falsifies data and cares only for her career is *not a (true) scientist*, and conversely maintain that a postal worker who applies the experimental method to all things she encounters is indeed *a (true) scientist*. We might say that the former counts as a scientist in the descriptive sense (by dint of being a professional physicist), but fails to count as a scientist in the normatively loaded sense – and conversely for the postal worker. I suggested that gender terms – along with many other terms – similarly exhibit a dual character, and that this is exploited in “Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration” and the like. In what follows, I shall call statements of this sort “normatively shifted particular predications”.

One might well wonder why I appeal to lexical polysemy, rather than explain such statements in terms of conversational implicature. Why posit multiple (though related) senses for words in the lexicon? Consider a different case mentioned in the main article: Romeo says “Juliet is the sun”; here, it would be strange to suggest that “the sun” is polysemous as between the star at the center of our solar system and *something else*. Rather, we do better to recognize a common sort of conversational maneuver. Romeo intentionally says something obviously false; his audience recognizes this, and attributes to him the intention to get something else across; i.e. that Juliet is sun-like in some relevant respect; as it might be, that she is radiant.

Likewise – one might think – if someone utters “Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration”, *and the only available lexical sense of “man” is the flat descriptive one*, then he utters something that is obviously false, and so the familiar Gricean mechanisms of reinterpretation are triggered. His audience searches for another communicated meaning, and arrives, in this case, at a meaning to the effect that Hillary Clinton is the only member of the Obama administration who lives up to the norms and ideals associated with manhood. To maintain uniformity of analysis, one could give a similar analysis of all of the Knobe/Prasada dual character cases, including the assertion that the postal worker is a (true) scientist. “Scientist” is not polysemous as between the blank descriptive sense *person*

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who makes a living by, or gives much of his time to, doing science and the normatively loaded sense *person who lives up to the norms and ideals of science in his practice and reasoning*. Rather, falsely saying of a person who obviously is making a living doing science that he is not a (true) scientist implicates that he is not living up to the norms and ideals of science. There is no normatively loaded sense for “scientist”, only a normatively loaded implicature.

Is this not the form of a general viable account of normatively shifted particular predications; the normative shift is not to a related sense, but to an implicature? This would be a relatively small amendment to my overall account, and were it not for the phenomenon of normative generics and their invocation as premises in arguments for the corresponding normatively shifted particular predications, I might be tempted to answer ‘yes’.

The existence of normative generics has long been noted in the literature (e.g., Burton-Robert, 1977; Carlson, 1995; Lawler, 1973). These are generics that seem naturally tailored to advise or admonish. They have a characteristic ‘hortatory’ force. For example, “boys don’t cry” is false as a description of the facts (since boys certainly do cry), yet assertions involving it can nonetheless serve to express an *admonition*, or an *encouragement* to hold back the expression of feeling. Similarly, “a woman values her family over her career” does not convey so much an empirical demographic observation as an *exhortation*, even perhaps, a *rebuke*. “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk” was not introduced into public consciousness as a banal descriptive observation; utterances of it rather serve as *injunctions* precisely because friends (descriptively speaking) all too often let their friends drive drunk, and activists wished to change this pattern.

The Crucial Observation

The crucial observation is this: there would seem to be a particularly tight connection between normative generics and normatively shifted particular predications. If one wishes to defend, justify, or argue for a normatively shifted predication (or its negation), by far the most natural (might one say *only*?) way to do so is to appeal to a normative generic, either explicitly or implicitly. If someone who has been (descriptively) my friend for many years lets me drive home drunk, I might declare that she is *not my friend* – because *friends don’t let friends drive drunk*. Likewise, we might say to a careerist falsifier of data “you call yourself a scientist? You are no scientist. Scientists care about truth and understanding, not their personal advancement.”

As a real-world illustration, recall the interview with the erstwhile contender for the 2012 Republican nomination, Herman Cain:

Interviewer: Before you announced your campaign, you said that the liberal establishment is scared that “a real black man might run against Barack Obama.” Are you suggesting Obama isn’t really black?

Cain: A real black man is not timid about making the right decisions, that’s what I meant. (Interview with Andrew Goldman, *New York Times Magazine*, June 30th, 2011)

Cain explicitly appeals to a normative generic to explain his prior assertion. As a less explicit example, we might recall the remark of political commenter Andrew Durham: “After all, we do need a real man in the

White House. Unfortunately, that would mean Hillary Clinton who, like it or not, is a person of great personal strength and political power". The suppressed premise would most naturally be reconstructed as "a (real) man is a person of great personal strength and political power". If these arguments are at all coherent then there must be a tight link – preferably, one might suppose, a *semantic* link -- between the subject term (the "restrictor") in the generic and the predicate in the normatively shifted particular predication.

What, then, is the link between normative generics and normatively shifted predications that explains the availability of such arguments? And how are we to analyze the normative generics themselves? The polysemy model explains the connection while allowing us to provide a uniform treatment for normative and descriptive generics at the level of logical form: the subject term of normative generics is understood as involving the normatively loaded, not the flat descriptive, sense of the term. This is why they can be used to argue directly for particular predications involving the normatively loaded sense of the term. (Further details are given at length in the main paper.)

The important point is that if we deny that there is normative/descriptive polysemy associated with dual character terms, then we cannot apply such an analysis to the associated normative generics, and it is consequently difficult to see how to explain the tight argumentative -- and hence likely semantic -- connection between normative generics and their associated normatively shifted particular predications.

On a competing pragmatic account, these normatively shifted particular predications are obviously false descriptive claims, which – in virtue of their obvious falsity – *implicate* something to the effect that the subject succeeds (or fails) in living up to certain norms and ideals that apply to a group. One way to begin to develop the competing account, so as to explain the reliance on normative generics in defending the corresponding normatively shifted particular predications, would be to give normative generics a distinct semantic analysis from descriptive generics, so as to account for their characteristic hortatory force. The normative generics then state that certain norms or ideals apply to a group; the particular predications implicate that particular individuals do (or do not) live up to them. The invocation of the generic is thus to be understood as a defense not of what is said by the particular predication, but of what is implicated by the use of it.

As discussed in the main paper, Ariel Cohen (2001) is one of very few theorists who present a detailed concrete, proposal concerning normative generics. Cohen's proposal treats normative generics (in contrast with descriptive generics) as having underlying logical forms that differ radically from their surface forms. For Cohen, the real predicate of every normative generic sentence is an unpronounced predicate meaning *is in effect*, and the entire articulated portion of the sentence is, at logical form, a singular term denoting a rule (see also Carlson, 1995). In this way, one can, perhaps, account for the hortatory force of uses of such generics; they assert that a particular rule is in effect. Given that the rule is in effect, the relevant implicatures of corresponding particular predications might them seem justified.

As stated, the account has three drawbacks. First, for the normative generics themselves there is the wide disparity between the surface form and the proposed logical form. Second, there is the resultant non-uniform treatment of normative and purely descriptive generics. Finally, there remains a puzzle about the pragmatic explanation of the appeal to a normative generic in arguments intended to

justify the particular predication, or more exactly, its supposed implicature. The resolution of this puzzle leads back to the dual character concept account.

To develop this last point, there is not in general any reliable connection between falling afoul of a particular rule and being the subject of the sorts of normatively shifted predictions we are discussing here. For example, it is a rule – very much in effect – that third year students in the Princeton philosophy graduate program must complete their course work by December of that year. A student who violates this rule suffers a range of consequences – but being deemed to be *not a (true) third year Princeton philosophy graduate student* is not among those consequences.² It is not a generally acceptable inference that, if Ks are subject to some rule, then Ks that do not obey that rule are *not (true) Ks*. Normative injunctions, rules and regulations abound, but only a small and special subset can be adduced to support the corresponding particular predications, *or their supposed implicatures*. Why is that? The pivotal issues are whether the particular predications include dual concept terms, and whether the rule expresses a norm or ideal that applies to the group in question in virtue of its putative societal role.

A ‘Mirroring’ Pragmatic Account

Perhaps, then, a proponent of a pragmatic account could take a different tack. She could give both descriptive and so-called normative generics a uniform semantics, and she also could avail herself of the notion of the dual character concept and the subsequent distinctions appealed to by the polysemy account, yet maintain that all this operates pragmatically rather than lexically. That is, she might agree that the phenomenon in question is to be explained in much the way that it is in my main paper (with reference to dual character concepts, understood as I elaborate them, and so on so forth), yet maintain that there is no *lexically available* normatively loaded sense. We can make use of normatively loaded senses in thought, but in language, we can only avail ourselves of the descriptive sense. But by uttering obviously false descriptive statements, we can trigger in our listeners a search for a more informative communicated meaning, and so if there is a normative sense available to our listeners *in thought*, then they will latch on to this. If no such normative sense is available to them – i.e., if they do not have a dual character conception of the relevant category, as is the case above with *third year Princeton philosophy graduate students* – then the normative interpretation will not be available. And just as with the polysemy account, on this pragmatic account, normative generics can be accounted for in the same way as particular normatively shifted predications; they both involve implicatures exploiting the non-lexicalized normative sense of the term, hence the tight connection between the two communicative acts. *The implicature of the false generic backs up and supports the implicature of the corresponding*

² This observation should also give us pause concerning any account of normative generics that takes them to assert that a particular rule is in effect. Despite this rule’s very much being in effect, this state of affairs is not readily described with the generic “third year Princeton philosophy graduate students complete their coursework by December of that year”. Without an explicit “must”, this is most naturally interpreted as a descriptive statement – for example, it would be odd to utter it as a rebuke to a student who is making poor progress. This is not to say that one could not infer from the descriptive statement that something normative must lurk in the background – since why else would students not avail themselves of more time? – but the sentence itself is not naturally understood as a normative generic. (Though of course, as discussed in the main paper, it would be possible to hear it as such with enough stage-setting – but that stage-setting, I argue, amounts to coercing a non-dual character concept into a dual character one, allowing us to exploit the accompanying ad hoc polysemy.)

false particular claim. Might a pragmatic account in this way match the explanatory power of the polysemy account?³

The disabling problem for this sort of pragmatic account is that it is just not generally plausible for the normative generics themselves. One can see how utterances such as “Hillary Clinton is a man” could trigger a search for an alternative communicated content in virtue of being obviously descriptively false. However, *normative generics do not in general have this feature; these sentences are not in general obviously false (or obviously true) on their descriptive interpretations*. Consider, for example, a standard utterance of “friends don’t let friends drive drunk”. For the pragmatic account to explain its normative force, we would have to suppose that “friends don’t let friends drive drunk” is *so obviously false* as a descriptive statement that the speaker could not have possibly meant to assert that – or alternatively, so obviously true that it triggers a search for a more informative content. Neither characterization seems remotely plausible. Similarly, consider the statement “scientists care about truth and understanding, not personal advancement”. One can easily hear the statement as a normatively loaded one while thinking that, descriptively, scientists tend to be a mixed bag and so the descriptive counterpart of the statement is neither obviously false nor obviously true. Likewise, the truth or falsity of a descriptive interpretation of “a woman puts family before career” would seem to be a complex empirical question for sociologists and psychologists to answer, yet this does not prevent the statement from being interpreted normatively – as, say, a rebuke directed at working mothers. There is nothing obvious or unreasonable about the descriptive interpretations of these generics, yet they are most naturally interpreted normatively. It is difficult to see just how a pragmatic account in terms of conversational implicature would make sense of this.

The fact that there is just no general impetus to prompt conversational re-interpretations of putatively normative generics can also be seen by considering embedded contexts. Utterances of (1) and (3) could be straightforwardly true; they do not seem to need re-interpretation.

- (1) If scientists put truth above personal advancement then Depak Das⁴ was not a scientist.
- (2) Depak Das was an exception, of course, but scientists put truth above personal advancement.
- (3) Fred believes that scientists put truth above personal advancement; that is why he thinks that Depak Das was not a scientist.
- (4) Fred believes that scientists put truth above personal advancement; that is why he thinks that Depak Das was an exception.

³ To make it seem viable we must set aside the pressing question of how a speech community could systematically use a term to communicate two meanings without, over time, the term simply becoming polysemous. Even if a particular phenomenon begins life as a pragmatic matter, the lexicon can evolve to assimilate it (see, e.g., Lakoff, 1987 for discussion).

⁴ Depak Das was a very productive Scientific Director of the Cardiovascular Research Center at the University of Connecticut; his research focused on the effects on the heart of a compound found in red wine. After a long and extensive investigation, the University of Connecticut recently charged that he had faked his research in twenty six papers published in a dozen journals.

The same holds for utterances of (2) and (4). Is this not strong evidence that “scientists put truth above personal advancement” is indeed polysemous, as between a flat descriptive generic that admits of exceptions in the form of scientists who first and foremost care about personal advancement, and a normative generic that controls being a (real) scientist? And don’t (1) through (4) likewise suggest that “scientist” in “Depak Das was a scientist” is polysemous?

The Looming Empirical Issue

Finally, there is a significant empirical question hanging over the supposed sustainability of a pragmatic analysis of normative generics. Most interestingly, young children tend to show a lag between appreciating semantic meaning and understanding implicatures. This is most dramatically illustrated in the case of scalar implicatures – for example, the fact that “some” implicates *not all*, and “two” implicates *not three*. Preschool-aged children differ quite dramatically from adults in this respect; they interpret such quantifiers and number words ‘logically’. Three-year-olds are perfectly happy to say “some of the pennies are in the box” when all the pennies are in the box, and so on and so forth (e.g., Barner, Chow, & Yang, 2009; Noveck, 2001; Pouscoulous, Noveck, Politzer, & Bastide, 2007). Over the course of development, children’s appreciation for conversational norms concerning informativeness and the like increases, and they become more adult-like in their usages and interpretations.

If young preschool-aged children are able to understand normative generics, this would favor a semantic account along the lines offered here over alternative pragmatic accounts. Preschoolers certainly understand descriptive generics, but no research to date has been conducted on their understanding of normative generics. (Marjorie Rhodes and I are currently investigating the question.) Anecdotally, though, we can observe that parents would seem quite liberal in their use of normative generics when addressing their young children, and liberal use on behalf of parents is often an indication of competence on behalf of children. The canonical example of a normative generic, “boys don’t cry”, *is rarely uttered by an adult speaking to another adult*. Are preschoolers misled by such statements, taking them to be (perhaps false) descriptive statements? Is it only after they master complex pragmatic inferences that they come to understand the statement as intended? These are empirical questions, but if children do indeed show early competence with normative generics as such, this would count against a pragmatic account of them.

Conclusion

It is difficult to maintain that (putatively) normative generics are in fact obviously false (or alternatively, obviously true) descriptive generics that, when uttered, trigger a search for a distinct, pragmatically communicated content that has normative force. Since the descriptive counterparts of normative generics are not, in general, either obviously false or obviously true, it is far from clear why such a search would be triggered, and, further, developmental data may well tell against such an account. However, if normative generics do indeed have the normatively loaded meanings they appear to have, then we can *both* give an account of these generics without positing surprising differences between their logical forms and those of purely descriptive generics, *and* explain the tight connection

between them and 'normatively shifted' particular predications, such as "Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration". If normative generics do get their normative import semantically, by way of their constitutive dual concept terms, then *since those terms are also present in the particular predications under discussion*, they too will have a normatively loaded semantic reading. This, I submit, is why normative generics are frequently offered in straightforward arguments for the corresponding particular predications.

Does this mean that I accept that "Hillary Clinton is a man" is literally true on one of its readings? The answer is 'no' in this case, but not because of any purely linguistic considerations, as I think there certainly can be true normatively shifted predications. Consider a professional scientist, like Das, who has falsified data throughout his career for the sake of fame and fortune. I do say that there is a reading of the sentence "this man is not a scientist" on which it is literally true. This is because – as discussed in the main paper – there is a primary societal role that is appropriately associated with scientists, which this man does not even come close to fulfilling, thanks to his extreme disregard for truth and understanding. The parallel points do not actually hold in the case of gender. Underlying – perhaps literally presupposed by – the assertion that *Hillary Clinton is a man* is the claim it is a *man's* distinctive role, and not a *woman's* role, to be strong, take charge, and lead; to be forceful, powerful, assertive. A *woman's* role, by implicit contrast, is to be gentle and submissive, passive and accommodating. This I reject.

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