

Synthese

Generics and Metalinguistic Negotiation

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
Full Title:	Generics and Metalinguistic Negotiation
Article Type:	T.C. : Indeterminacy and Underdetermination
Keywords:	generics; metalinguistic negotiation; contextualism; metalinguistic usage
Corresponding Author:	David Plunkett Dartmouth College Hanover, NH UNITED STATES
Corresponding Author Secondary Information:	
Corresponding Author's Institution:	Dartmouth College
Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:	
First Author:	David Plunkett
First Author Secondary Information:	
Order of Authors:	David Plunkett
	Rachel Katharine Sterken
	Tim Sundell
Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
Funding Information:	
Abstract:	<p>In this paper, we consider how Plunkett and Sundell's account of metalinguistic negotiation interacts with disputes involving generics. In a metalinguistic negotiation, speakers disagree about normative issues concerning language, such as issues about what a given word should mean in the relevant context, or which of a range of related concepts a word should express. In a metalinguistic negotiation, speakers argue about such issues implicitly. They do so via competing "metalinguistic" usages of terms, wherein speakers seem to use (rather than mention) words to communicate views about the very words they are using. We have argued that some disputes involving generics are best thought of as metalinguistic negotiations, and that these cases can be illuminating for our more general theorizing about generics. More specifically, we argued that Rachel Sterken's view about the meaning of generics – which she has argued for in recent work, on independent theoretical grounds – is best equipped to deal to account for these metalinguistic negotiations about generics, relative to other leading contemporary views of generics. We thus argue for a "package deal" view of generics: a view that combines Plunkett and Sundell's account of metalinguistic negotiation with Sterken's contextualist view of generics.</p>

Generics and Metalinguistic Negotiation

By

David Plunkett (Dartmouth College, Philosophy Department)
david.plunkett@dartmouth.edu

and

Rachel Katharine Sterken (University of Hong Kong, Philosophy Department)
rachel.sterken@gmail.com

and

and Timothy Sundell (University of Kentucky, Philosophy Department)
timothy.sundell@uky.edu

“Generics and Metalinguistic Negotiation”

By [Removed for blind Review]

Draft of April 10, 2021, for Submission to *Synthese*

Please do not cite, quote, or circulate without permission from one of the authors

Introduction.

In recent work, David Plunkett and Tim Sundell have developed the idea that some disputes are “metalinguistic negotiations”. In a metalinguistic negotiation, speakers disagree about normative issues concerning language, such as issues about what a given word should mean in the relevant context, or which of a range of related concepts a word should express. It’s perfectly possible for speakers to communicate about such issues explicitly, by saying things like “we should use language in such-and-such a way” or “we should use term X to express such-and-such concept”. In a metalinguistic negotiation, by contrast, speakers argue about such issues *implicitly*. They do so via competing “metalinguistic” usages of terms, wherein speakers seem to use (rather than mention) words to communicate views about the very words they are using. Metalinguistic negotiations don’t necessarily involve speakers “merely talking past” one another. To the contrary, metalinguistic negotiations often express genuine, substantive disagreements that can be well worth having. Questions about how we should use language – such as questions about which of a range of concepts we should express by a term – can be loaded with significance, in ways that closely connect to a range of non-linguistic issues, including questions of how to live our lives or what the mind-independent structure of reality really is. Plunkett and Sundell have argued that a number of important disputes of interest to philosophers (including, for example, moral, aesthetic, and legal disputes) might well be metalinguistic negotiations, as well as, moreover, some disputes amongst philosophers themselves (including disputes in a wide range of areas, from fundamental metaphysics to philosophy of law to epistemology).¹

¹ For the relevant co-authored work by Plunkett and Sundell that we are summarizing in this above paragraph, see (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a), (Plunkett and Sundell 2013b), (Plunkett and Sundell 2014), and (Plunkett and Sundell 2021). Plunkett and Sundell both develop and expand on these core ideas in solo authored work, including (Plunkett 2015), (Plunkett 2016), (Sundell 2011b), (Sundell 2011a), (Sundell 2016), and (Sundell 2017).

Metalinguistic negotiations can center on different aspects of linguistic meaning. In some metalinguistic negotiations, speakers argue about issues tied to semantic underdetermination, such as how to make a vague term more precise, or how to set the threshold for a relative gradable adjective. Other metalinguistic negotiations aren't fundamentally tied to issues of underdetermination in the current meaning of a word. For example, a speaker may put forward a view that the meaning of a term should be something that runs counter to the widely established usage of that term. Such a speaker might be motivated by the idea that the word's current (perhaps fully determinate) meaning is suboptimal in some way – perhaps even *defective* in some way – and should be changed. This is illustrative of a more general point: we can engage in metalinguistic negotiation in a range of contexts, putting forward a range of views about how we should use language, ranging from relatively modest proposals about how to resolve ambiguity to radical proposals that seek to overturn existing meanings.

In this paper, we consider how this picture of metalinguistic negotiation interacts with a particular class of disputes that has received significant philosophical attention in recent years: namely, disputes involving *generics*. We argue that some disputes involving generics are best thought of as metalinguistic negotiations, and that these cases can be illuminating in the context of the more general literature on generics. More specifically, we argue that, among the leading contemporary views on the meaning of generics, some are better equipped than others to explain what is going on with the cases we draw attention to in this paper. The view that we think does the best on this front is a view that Rachel Sterken has argued for in recent work, on independent theoretical grounds.² This view – which we refer to simply as *contextualism about generics* – holds that the truth-conditional variability of generics is not due to the complexity of some unified phenomenon of genericity, but rather to semantic context-sensitivity. In particular, according to Sterken's view, there are at least three indexical components to fixing the semantic value of the generic operator, *Gen*, relative to a context: its quantificational force, lexical restriction, and contextual domain restriction. Contextualism about generics can smoothly read the cases we

² See (Sterken 2015) and (Sterken 2016).

draw attention to as metalinguistic negotiations. This resulting “package deal”, we argue, is an attractive overall account of generics (including the cases we highlight here), which is better than what other views of generics can offer.

Our main goal in this paper is to argue on behalf of this “package deal” view of generics (the view that combines Plunkett and Sundell’s account of metalinguistic negotiation with Sterken’s contextualist view of generics) in order to help us make progress in our thinking about generics. In addition to this, we also have a secondary goal. Just as thinking about metalinguistic negotiation matters for theorizing about the meaning of generics, we think the reverse is true as well. The more places a philosophical idea or argument helps us to do serious explanatory work, the more reason we have to endorse it. Thus, if the best package deal for accounting for the meaning of generics makes use of the idea of metalinguistic negotiation, then this lends further support to the idea of metalinguistic negotiation in general.

Before we begin, we should state two qualifications about our work in what follows. First, our goal in the paper is *not* to fully motivate the idea of there being metalinguistic negotiations as such. Instead, our argument is that if a range of other cases *not* involving generics (which Plunkett and Sundell have discussed in other work) are best thought of as metalinguistic negotiations, then so too are some of the cases of generics we consider. Second, different theories of generics can make use of different theoretical tools in accounting for the cases we draw attention to, and not everyone advocating for one of them will read our cases as metalinguistic negotiations. At the end of the day, the main question on the table is what the overall resulting “package deal” looks like. We don’t think there is going to be a knock-down, theory-neutral argument we can give to demonstrate that the cases we present are metalinguistic negotiations (and especially not one that we can put forward in a single paper such as this one). In part, this is because the question of which linguistic exchanges are best understood as metalinguistic negotiations interacts with one’s overall views in metasemantics (and semantics) in complex ways. Put roughly, one’s metasemantic (and semantic) views *both* inform and are informed by one’s take on the prevalence of metalinguistic negotiation, which makes it hard to settle which cases are metalinguistic negotiations in isolation from a deeper engagement with issues in

metasemantics (and semantics).³ With this in mind, we think the core issues at hand is comparative overall theory choice. What we argue is that thinking of the cases we draw attention to as metalinguistic negotiations, in combination with the contextualist view that Sterken offers, is a better overall explanation of the various phenomena than what other theories of the meaning of generics can offer.

We break up our work in what follows into four main sections, followed by a conclusion. In the first section (§1), we introduce the topic of generics, and Sterken’s account of generics in particular. In the next section (§2), we introduce Plunkett and Sundell’s account of metalinguistic negotiation, and the general overall framework that it is embedded in. With these two views in hand, it raises a natural possibility: that speakers could engage in metalinguistic negotiation over the content of *Gen* along the different context-sensitive dimensions of that content that Sterken’s view highlights. We think this is indeed possible, and, moreover, that this is an apt characterization of what is going on in a number of disputes. In the third section (§3), we make this case, introducing a variety of different kinds of metalinguistic negotiation that we think are well-explained by a “package deal” of Sterken’s view of generics in combination with the idea of metalinguistic negotiation from Plunkett and Sundell. In §4, we then compare our proposed “package deal” with salient rival ones, which stem from influential rival views of generics. We argue that these other views offer less promising accounts of the cases (and, more generally, the relevant linguistic phenomena) we introduced in §3. Thus, we argue, thinking seriously about metalinguistic negotiation can play a role – in combination with the other theoretical strengths of Sterken’s view of generics – as an inference to the best explanation argument on behalf of Sterken’s view.

§1. *Sterken’s Contextualism about Generics.*

In this section, we introduce the topic of generics, and present the outlines of the view that Sterken has recently developed at length in other work. We’ll refer to that view as *contextualism about generics*.

³ For more on this point, see (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a).

We start with Sterken's contextualist view for two reasons. First, we think it is the best view of generics on offer, given independent theoretical motivations. Second, according to the contextualist view, generic expressions have variable truth conditions because they are semantically context-sensitive. Those are features which factor significantly into several of the core cases of metalinguistic negotiation that Plunkett and Sundell have discussed in other work. If the question of how to set various contextual parameters makes these other expressions ripe for metalinguistic negotiation, then that suggests to us that the setting of similar contextual parameters in the use of generic terms will also be ripe for metalinguistic negotiation. And, in fact, we think there are such cases involving metalinguistic negotiation over these aspects of the meaning of generics, though they have not yet received significant attention in the literature. We turn to those in section 3, after providing the background material on metalinguistic negotiation.

In motivating her view, Sterken starts with the widely observed fact that the truth conditions of generic expressions seem to vary greatly.⁴ This has most often taken the form of the observation that different sentences involving generics seem to involve different kinds of generalization.

- (1) Candy is bad for your teeth.
- (2) Ticks carry Lyme disease.
- (3) Books are paperbacks.
- (4) Ducks lay eggs.

As Sterken observes, (1) seems to convey a simple generalization about candy: "In general, candy is bad for your teeth."⁵ It's hard enough to say what this generalization amounts to, since there is no explicit word or phrase expressing the generalization, and whatever it is, it admits of exceptions. But it gets harder when we come to sentence (2), which also strikes us as expressing a truth, despite the fact that only 1% or so of ticks carry Lyme disease. Most existing books, by a wide margin, are paperbacks, and yet (3) seems clearly to express something false. Meanwhile (4) is

4 (Sterken 2015).

5 (Sterken 2015), 1.

true, despite the fact that only adult, female ducks lay eggs. So different generics, as they are used in their respective contexts, convey different generalizations.

But there is another, less widely discussed feature of the truth-conditional variability of generics: one and the same generic can vary in its truth conditions, from context to context. Sterken considers the following example from Bernard Nickel:

(5) Dobermans have floppy ears.

Dobermans are often thought of as having pointy ears. But this is due to the fact that their ears are typically cut at a young age by breeders, so that they adhere to a conventional breed standard. Nickel observes that in a context focused on evolutionary biology, (5) is true. But in a context of a conversation about dog breeding, (5) seems clearly false.⁶

Sterken provides several additional examples, including (6):

(6) Cabs are yellow.

Sterken imagines a context where, by statute, cabs must be yellow or pink, but as a matter of fact, all cabs in operation are yellow. If (6) is uttered in the context of giving travel advice to a friend, it seems clearly true. If (6) is uttered in the context of a conversation about the city regulations, or as an unbounded generalization, it is intuitively false.⁷

There are of course many different strategies for the understanding these cases. According to contextualism about generics, the implicit generic operator *Gen* is semantically context sensitive, which allows these cases to be understood in a similar manner to how other semantically context sensitive terms (e.g., demonstratives, domain variables, and pronouns) explain contextual variability: the apparent differences in truth-value between contexts is explained by differences in the content of the generalization expressed by *Gen* in those contexts. In the Cab case, for instance, the content of *Gen* has some sort of normative component to it due to the

6 (Sterken 2015), discussing a case from (Nickel 2008).

7 See (Sterken 2015).

salience of the city regulations, whereas in the travel advice context the content of *Gen* is a descriptive generalization about what cabs the traveler would likely encounter on their trip.

On Sterken's proposal, there are three components that make up the semantic value of *Gen*, and each of these can vary independently as a function of context:⁸

(i) the quantificational or statistical force of the generalization (so, whether or not the generalization requires that *all*, *most*, *many* or some other proportion of the members of the given kind satisfy the given property),

(ii) the lexical domain restriction (so, whether or not the generalization generalizes over normal members of the kind, actual members, or any other modally or qualitatively circumscribed domain), and finally,

(iii) the contextual domain restriction (so, whether or not the generalization has any more traditional contextually mandated restrictions on the domain of quantification, as with adverbs of quantification more generally).

In contrast to Sterken's contextualist view, other theorists have proposed views with less radical forms of context-sensitivity, on which *Gen* expresses a largely stable generalization which varies in a relatively controlled manner. For instance, consider the views on Bernhard Nickel, and Francis Jeffrey Pelletier, Nicholas Asher and Michael Morreau, that understand generics in terms of a notion of "normality".⁹ On these views, *Gen* expresses, very roughly, that all normal members of the kind have the given property. On such views, the context-sensitivity of generics is limited to specifying the parameters of what counts as "normal" in context.

Another strategy taken by a number of theorists is to posit some form of ambiguity. For instance, Manfred Krifka treats generics as ambiguous between a descriptive generalization reading and a metalinguistic reading.¹⁰ Sarah-Jane Leslie treats generics as ambiguous between a normative and descriptive reading.¹¹ Ariel Cohen treats generics as ambiguous between what he calls an *absolute* and a *relative*

8 See (Sterken 2015) for the relevant arguments and cases that attest to this claim.

9 See (Nickel 2016), (Pelletier and Asher 1997), (Asher and Pelletier 2013), and (Asher and Morreau 1995).

10 See (Krifka 2012).

11 See (Leslie 2015).

reading.¹² And Gregory Carlson offers readings of generics along descriptive lines, in addition to a “rules-and-regulations” reading.¹³

A further strategy taken by other theorists is to hold that the contextual variability is explained outside the semantics altogether. For example, some argue that the context-sensitivity of generics is explained entirely pragmatically.¹⁴ Others treat generics as a species of kind-predication so that generics don’t express generalizations in the straightforward sense, if at all.¹⁵

§2. *Plunkett and Sundell on Metalinguistic Negotiation.*

Our work in this paper is focused on the possibility of metalinguistic negotiation over claims involving generics. Now that we have introduced generics, and our preferred theory of them, we turn to an overview of metalinguistic negotiation.

Plunkett and Sundell introduce the notion of “metalinguistic negotiation” in the context of a more general framework for thinking about disagreement and its linguistic expression.¹⁶ First, they understand *disagreement* itself as a certain kind of conflict in attitudes, in which those attitudes are in “rational conflict” in the relevant kind of way. For example: two people believing conflicting propositions, or (perhaps) two people having conflicting plans (of the right kind). This is a *state-based* rather than *activity-based* way of talking about “disagreement”. On this way of using the term ‘disagreement’, two people disagree in virtue of properties of their mental states, regardless of how—or even whether—they express those mental states in a conversation, a written exchange, etc.¹⁷

Plunkett and Sundell distinguish disagreements from *disputes*, which they define as linguistic exchanges that appear (either to the speakers themselves, or to observers of those expressions) to express a disagreement. For two individuals to

12 See (Cohen 2001b).

13 See (Carlson 1995).

14 See (Nguyen 2020) and (Tessler and Goodman 2019).

15 See (Lievesman 2011), (Carlson 1977), and (Teichman 2016).

16 The framework that we summarize below is put forward in see (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a), (Plunkett and Sundell 2013b), (Plunkett and Sundell 2014), and (Plunkett and Sundell 2021).

17 In this paper, we use italics to introduce terminology or for rhetorical stress, single quotes to mention linguistic expressions, small caps to name concepts, and double quotes for quoting other authors, “scare quoting”, simultaneous use and mention, and other informal uses.

have a dispute is for them to be engaged in a kind of activity, a certain kind of conversation. These are explicitly stipulative definitions of ‘disagreement’ and ‘dispute’, meant to earn their theoretical keep by allowing us to focus on certain specific phenomena for purposes of theorizing in philosophy of mind and philosophy of language.¹⁸

With this notion of “dispute” in hand, we can ask the following questions: “Does a given dispute express an actual disagreement?” And, “Supposing it does, how does it do so?” Here, Plunkett and Sundell distinguish between those disputes that express disagreements via the literal content of the sentences uttered (the semantics of the relevant statements) from those that express disagreements through pragmatic mechanisms. In deference to the widespread assumption that the former kind of dispute is most common, they call disputes expressing disagreement semantically “canonical disputes”. In turn, they call disputes where the disagreement is expressed pragmatically “non-canonical disputes”.

Of course, a particular dispute might express disagreements through more than one mechanism – especially if the speakers disagree about multiple different things. This isn’t meant to be a binary cut. Especially if we individuate disputes in a temporarily extended way, there will likely be cases involving a mix of mechanisms.¹⁹ Still, the distinction helps us focus on the question of how, in a specific exchange, a particular disagreement is getting expressed.

There is a variety of pragmatic mechanisms that speakers can use to express disagreements, and thus to engage in non-canonical disputes. These include the usual pragmatic suspects: implicature, presupposition, presupposition accommodation, etc. Among these mechanisms is what Plunkett and Sundell, following Chris Barker, call a “metalinguistic” use of a term.²⁰ When a speaker uses a term in a metalinguistic way, she communicates a view about the use of that very term.

Suppose Speaker 1 and Speaker 2 mutually know the temperature outside. (That is, they not only know, but each knows that the other knows, and knows that

18 See (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a) for emphasis on this point.

19 See (Plunkett 2015) for emphasis of this point.

20 See (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a), drawing on (Barker 2002).

the other knows that they know, etc.) Speaker 1, under these circumstances, utters sentence (7).

(7) It's hot out.

The idea of a metalinguistic usage is that in this kind of situation, the information Speaker 1 aims to communicate is not, in the first instance, about what the temperature is—even if that information is the semantic content of (7) in the usual way. That information about the temperature is already part of the common ground. Speaker 1's main communicative aim is thus to communicate something else. What Speaker 1 aims to communicate is information about how the word 'hot' is used or should be used in this context, and specifically, that the threshold for counting as "hot" should be lower than the current temperature. Speaker 1, in other words, communicates that *this is hot enough to count as "hot"*.

In a situation like this, Speaker 2 can disagree with the metalinguistic claim Speaker 1 communicates. If she does, then she can respond with a competing metalinguistic use.

(8) No, this isn't hot.

The disagreement expressed in the exchange of (7)-(8) is not about what the temperature is, but about whether that much heat is enough, in the present context, to merit the label "hot". When two or more speakers engage in this kind of *competing* metalinguistic usages of a term, they engage in what Plunkett and Sundell call a *metalinguistic dispute*.²¹

Some metalinguistic disputes concern how a term is in fact used in some context or by some speech community. Plunkett and Sundell call these *descriptive metalinguistic disputes*. But in other metalinguistic disputes, it's much more plausible to

21 In (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a), Plunkett and Sundell introduce this kind of a dispute as one kind of non-canonical dispute. They do so on the assumption that metalinguistic usage is best thought of as a pragmatic mechanism. However, as Plunkett and Sundell underscore, their primary interest is in the phenomena of metalinguistic disputes themselves, and not with the question of whether metalinguistic usages are best understood as semantic or pragmatic. Depending on how metalinguistic uses are best analyzed—and also, perhaps, on one's broader views about the semantics/pragmatics distinction itself—it could turn out that metalinguistic disputes are better thought of as canonical disputes. For example, on dynamic analyses such as the one in (Barker 2013), the communicated information about the threshold for 'hot' is just as much a part of the semantic content as the information about the temperature. See (Plunkett and Sundell 2021) for further discussion. In what follows, for ease of presentation, we will stick with the simplifying assumption that metalinguistic disputes are best thought of as a kind of non-canonical dispute.

think that the metalinguistic claims are normative—that they are claims about how a word *should* be used in the relevant context. These are what Plunkett and Sundell call *normative metalinguistic disputes*. The phrase *metalinguistic negotiation* is intended as a synonym for *normative metalinguistic dispute*.

Some metalinguistic disputes (descriptive or normative) focus exclusively on the content—relative to the speakers’ context—of the term in question, without calling into question the context-invariant aspects of that term’s meaning. Plausibly, the above dialogue about whether it’s “hot” out is an example like this. The speakers agree that the weather counts as “hot” just in case the temperature is above the contextual threshold—they just disagree about what that threshold is. In other metalinguistic disputes, however, the disagreement doesn’t focus on some element of context-sensitivity in the traditional sense. Rather the speakers express some disagreement about the context-invariant meaning of a term, which, following David Kaplan, we might think of the *character* of that term.²² Speakers can either engage in either a descriptive or normative metalinguistic dispute about that aspect of the word’s meaning.

Plunkett and Sundell argue that a number of metalinguistic negotiations are best thought of as ones about the context-invariant aspects of a terms meaning, including some disputes about who counts as a “person”, or what counts as a “sandwich”.²³ For instance, they consider the following case from Peter Ludlow.²⁴ Sports Illustrated had just come out with a list of the greatest fifty athletes of the twentieth century. The racehorse Secretariat was on the list. On a sports radio show, speakers called in arguing over whether or not Secretariat deserved to be on that list.

22 See (Kaplan 1989).

23 In folding together metalinguistic disputes involving context-sensitivity and disputes focusing on character, Plunkett and Sundell differ from other authors who offer analyses that are similar in spirit (even if not ones that are fully “metalinguistic” by their own lights), but that apply only to expressions that are context-sensitive (in a more less traditional sense of “context-sensitive”). See, for example, (DeRose 2004), (Khoo and Knobe 2016), (Khoo 2020), and (Silk 2016). If metalinguistic negotiation of Gen is real, it’s an example of metalinguistic dispute involving ordinary context sensitivity. Argumentatively, this works to our advantage in this paper, as those who grant that metalinguistic negotiation happens, but who are skeptical that “metalinguistic negotiation” over the character of a term is in fact the same basic phenomenon as that happens over the context-sensitive aspects of a term, can remain fully on board with our conclusions here.

24 (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a), discussing a case from (Ludlow 2008).

They made claims seeming to use the term ‘athlete’ (rather than explicitly mention it) such as those in the following exchange:

(9) “Secretariat is one of the greatest athletes of the twentieth century”

(10) “No, Secretariat is not one of the greatest athletes of the twentieth century”

As the discussion unfolded, it became clear that the root of the disagreement wasn’t how many races Secretariat won, or how fast he was. (We can even imagine that all the people calling in knew all of those facts). Rather, it turns out that, as the conversation unfolded, some of them thought horses (and other non-human animals) can’t be “athletes”. Plunkett and Sundell argue that a good way to understand this exchange on sports radio – one in which speakers appear to simply use the term ‘athlete’ as in (9) and (10) above – is as a metalinguistic negotiation about what the term ‘athlete’ should mean in the context at hand. But, as Ludlow emphasizes, it’s not as if they are arguing about how to set some kind of context-sensitive threshold or fill out some context-sensitive parameter for the term ‘athlete’. Indeed, as Ludlow emphasizes, it’s not as if that term is even context-sensitive in any obvious standard way. Thus, if Plunkett and Sundell are right that this exchange about Secretariat is a metalinguistic negotiation, it’s one about the basic context-insensitive meaning of the term.

One feature of those metalinguistic disputes involving context-sensitivity is especially relevant to our work here. To see it, first go back to that dispute about whether it’s “hot” out. At least as a first pass, the relevant scale is fairly determinate, and fairly simple: it’s just the scale of temperatures.²⁵ So a metalinguistic dispute about whether it’s “hot” outside is correspondingly going to be easy to understand—it will express (via competing metalinguistic uses of the word ‘hot’) where on that scale the threshold should be.

But not all context sensitive expressions—even other gradable adjectives like ‘hot’—are so simple. Following Chris Kennedy, we can distinguish a gradable

²⁵ If it turns out to be more complex than that, it will only serve to make the following points more strongly.

adjective's *vagueness* and its *indeterminacy*.²⁶ *Vagueness* refers simply to the fact that the adjective requires the specification of a threshold on a scale, and that once such a threshold is set, there will be borderline cases. *Indeterminacy*—which Kennedy understands as a kind of polysemy—means that the scale itself is in some way variable. Kennedy gives the example of the term 'large', as it applies to cities. He observes that in some contexts, a sentence like (x) expresses a truth, and in others it expresses something false.

(11) Mexico City is larger than Tokyo.

Those contexts will differ not by the placement of a threshold along a single scale, but rather by the question of whether the scale in question involves geographic area, or population size. If it involves the former, then (11) is true. If it involves the latter, then (11) is false.

Even the phenomenon of indeterminacy fails to exhaust the ways in which the content expressed by a gradable adjective can vary by context. Both geographic size and population are themselves plausibly thought of as linear scales. But many gradable adjectives are “multi-dimensional”. In other words, the scale along which some contextual threshold is set is itself composed of multiple other scales. Yitzhak Benbaji models the scale for “baldness” as a vector through a space characterized by dimensions corresponding to, on the one hand, number of hairs, and, on the other, percentage of hairy patches.²⁷ Characterizing such a scale requires of course not just a specification of what the underlying dimensions are, but a *weighting* of those dimensions, relative to one another.

Sundell suggests that when an expression is not just context-sensitive, but context-sensitive in *multiple ways*, we should expect the possibility of metalinguistic disputes focusing on each aspect of that context sensitivity.²⁸ Sundell argues that the term 'tasty' is multiply-context-sensitive in this way. Not only does it require a threshold—how tasty should something have to be to count as “tasty” in this

26 See (Kennedy 2007). Sundell (2016) cites (Kennedy 2007), from which parts of our below discussion draws. Sundell goes on to discuss not just indeterminacy, but *multidimensionality* in gradable adjectives. That added level of complexity again would serve only to make the points below more strongly, but can fairly be skipped in this discussion for ease of exposition.

27 See (Benbaji 2009).

28 (Sundell 2016).

context?—but it is also both multidimensional and highly indeterminate. What factors go in to determining whether something counts as tasty for purposes of this context? And he argues that it allows for *different kinds* of metalinguistic dispute in exactly the ways this would suggest. He imagines two speakers, Alpie and Betty, who own a bakery, and are discussing cupcakes, and contrasts three scenarios.

CUPCAKE 1

(12) Alpie: These cupcakes are tasty!

(13) Betty: No, these cupcakes are not tasty. You're thinking of the ones in the other room. These ones are made of wax.

CUPCAKE 2

(13) Alpie: These cupcakes are tasty!

(14) Betty: No they're passable, but not *tasty*. These are for our very best clients and I know we can do better.

CUPCAKE 3

(15) Alpie: These cupcakes are tasty!

(16) No, they're passable, but not *tasty*. They're perfectly sugary and fluffy, but boring. Let's add a subtle hint of smokiness.

Sundell describes the dialogue in CUPCAKE 1 as a simple canonical dispute. Alpie and Betty agree—are close enough—on what's required to count as “tasty”. They just disagree about whether these cupcakes have that property.

But CUPCAKE 2 and 3 are different. Sundell asks us to imagine that in each of these cases, both Alpie and Betty have just tasted the cupcakes. They know exactly what they taste like. What they disagree about is thus not what they taste like, but whether *tasting like that* should, for present purposes, count as a way of being “tasty”. The two cases differ, however, in the nature of that disagreement about what is to count as “tasty”.

In CUPCAKE 2, we can imagine that Alpie and Betty agree on what kinds of properties it takes for a cupcake to be tasty. In other words, they agree on what the relevant scale for “tastiness” is like. What they disagree about is whether these cupcakes are *high enough* on that scale to count as “tasty” for present purposes. Since those purposes involve important clients, the standards are high, and Betty thus negotiates on behalf of a high threshold for “tastiness”.

In CUPCAKE 3, by contrast, Alphie and Betty can't reach the point of negotiating a threshold on the scale of tastiness, because they do not agree on the relevant scale. Sundell proposes that Alphie and Betty's competing views on which scale they should adopt might well be tied to different views about how to best run their cupcake business. For example, perhaps Betty thinks that their target clientele would be more attracted to a different set of flavor profiles than is standard for cupcakes, such as ones that involve a subtle hint of smokiness.²⁹

Whether Sundell's particular reading of these cupcake examples which we are repeating here is correct or not is not the crucial issue. Rather, what matters is the general theoretical lesson these examples bring out: namely, that when an expression is contextually variable in multiple ways, we correspondingly find *different kinds* of metalinguistic disputes—differing by which element of semantic indeterminacy they aim to settle.

In these cupcake examples, we've been focusing on (purportedly) context-sensitive elements of 'tasty'. However, we should note that, as we discussed above, it's possible for metalinguistic disputes (whether descriptive or normative ones) to target not just conventionally context-sensitive elements of an expression's meaning, but even the expression's Kaplanian character. Thus, in principle, we should expect that a normative metalinguistic dispute could target yet further aspects of the meaning of a gradable adjective like 'tasty'—even aspects that are not semantically context sensitive. Nevertheless, it's natural to suppose that normative metalinguistic disputes will be easiest to find, and will sound most natural, as they target those elements of a word's meaning that are mutually presupposed by the speakers to be in some sense "up for grabs". We return to this point at multiple times in what follows, when we discuss different ways of thinking about generics and metalinguistic negotiation.

29 See (Sundell 2016, 19). In that paper, Sundell is concerned to argue for a pair of controversial claims about the semantics of expressions like 'tasty': namely, that they are not semantically evaluative, and that they do not have an argument position for an "experiencer" or "standard". Whether those claims are right need not affect the use of these cases as an illustration in this paper, as the idea that predicates of taste are relative gradable adjectives with some element of indeterminacy to their scale is consistent with a range of more conventional semantic accounts. Other parallel examples are easy to construct on analogy to these cases if even that much turns out not to be true of predicates of taste specifically.

Before moving on, we want to note one final important feature of Plunkett and Sundell’s views on metalinguistic negotiation. In some cases, speakers might self-consciously engage in metalinguistic disputes. But, in other cases, they might well be doing so unintentionally, and perhaps even resist this characterization of what they are doing. The crucial question, Plunkett and Sundell argue, is whether thinking of them as engaging in a metalinguistic dispute is the most theoretically illuminating way to understand their dispute, given all the relevant data, and all the relevant theoretical considerations. Given that ordinary speakers aren’t expert linguists – which is tied to the fact that practitioners of something (e.g., those speaking a language, playing tennis, telling jokes, etc.) aren’t always the best theorists of their own activity – we might well end up with a clash between the self-understanding of the speakers and the best theoretical account of what they are doing.³⁰

§3. *Negotiating The Content of Gen.*

We think that there is a range of disputes involving generics that are best thought of as metalinguistic negotiations. We now turn to making this case.

3.1 *A Cross-Section of metalinguistic negotiations about the content of Gen*

To start with, consider one relatively straightforward way in which speakers can engage in a metalinguistic negotiation about a generic expression. This is that, as we have already seen, they can use the generic expression to put forward rival views about that very expression. If two people who agree on the underlying facts about ingredients and construction of a lunch item nevertheless disagree about whether it is a “sandwich” – and, in connection to this, disagree about whether “a sandwich has two slices of bread” – this can be seen as a kind of classic example of metalinguistic negotiation. In this case, it can be seen as an argument about whether the generic term ‘sandwich’ should be applied to options that do not involve two slices of bread.³¹

But Sterken’s contextualism about generics allows us to go further, and to predict a wider array of possible metalinguistic uses—and thus possible

30 For further discussion and defense of this idea, see (Plunkett and Sundell 2021).

31 (Krifka 2012) considers similar cases, which he calls “definitional uses” of generics.

metalinguistic negotiations—involving generics. Contextualism about generics predicts that the meaning of *Gen* itself, relative to a context, should also be available as a site of disagreement, and thus as the subject of metalinguistic negotiation. And the prediction is actually more specific than that. Recall Sundell’s discussion of the dimensions along which a predicate of taste can vary. Because ‘tasty’ requires not just a threshold along a scale, but various aspects of the scale itself to be settled by context, we predict varieties of metalinguistic negotiation about the meaning of ‘tasty’ hinging on each of those aspects of its context sensitivity. Similarly, because *Gen* is context sensitive in three different respects—quantificational force, domain restriction, and lexical restriction—we should predict that disputes involving generics can hinge on how each of those parameters of *Gen*’s meaning should be fixed, relative to a context. And in fact, this is exactly what we find.

To see this, consider four different disputes about Norwegians and pizza.

PIZZA 1: Canonical Dispute

(17) Norwegians like pizza.

(18) No, you’re thinking of Swedes. Norwegians don’t like pizza very much, and pizza places are famously prone to going out of business in Norway.

Setting aside the dubious accuracy of the claims in (18), it’s easy to imagine the parties to the dispute in PIZZA 1 either in tacit agreement on the mode of generalization involved in (17), or close enough that the differences wouldn’t matter.³² In a case like this, the facts about the meaning of *Gen*, relative to the context, are for all intents and purposes settled. What will determine the truth value of (x) is simply the facts about how many Norwegians actually like pizza. It’s those facts that are the basis of the disagreement between the speakers of (17) and (18). To use Plunkett and Sundell’s terminology, the dispute in PIZZA 1 is a “canonical dispute”.

Now contrast PIZZA 1 with the following:

PIZZA 2: Metalinguistic Negotiation of Quantificational Force

³² Following Sterken’s discussion of (King 2014), we could see this on the model of supplementary expressions like ‘ready,’ or ‘enough,’ where, in many uses, an expression’s considerable context variability is resolved *enough* to allow for easy communication, yet needn’t be thought of as fully determinate.

(19) Norwegians like pizza.

(20) No, you're wrong. Not all Norwegians like pizza. My cousin is Norwegian and she doesn't like pizza.

While a dialogue like this could continue in a number of different ways, we can imagine it continuing with the speaker of (19) insisting that a single counterexample is insufficient to impugn her claim, and with the speaker of (20) insisting that her cousin is enough to prove that claim to be an over-generalization. We could even imagine—it needn't go this way, but it could—that the speaker of (20) would continue denying the truth of (19) even if, incredibly, it were demonstrated to her that every Norwegian *except* for her cousin likes pizza.

In a case like this, the disagreement hinges not on the question of how many Norwegians like pizza—the answer to which we can imagine to be mutually known to the speakers of (19) and (20). Neither is it plausibly construed as hinging on the definition of 'Norwegian'. Rather, the disagreement hinges on whether *that many Norwegians* is a *high enough* proportion of Norwegians to make the claim in (19) come out true. In other words, the disagreement hinges on how the meaning of *Gen* should be specified, relative to the context, and in particular, what *quantificational force* it is to have. The speaker of (19) intends something strong, but short of a strict universal. With her insistence that the claim is falsifiable via a single counterexample, the speaker of (20) tacitly insists that *Gen* be interpreted as a universal generalization.

As with any metalinguistic negotiation, the question of whether, or in what way, it is *worth* engaging in this sort of dispute depends on further—as yet unspecified—facts about the context. If the speakers of (19) and (20) are engaged in casual conversation, then it might be something of a waste of time to engage in this dispute. By contrast, if they are engaged in co-authoring an essay on gustatory trends in the Scandinavian nations for a travel guide, or in evaluating proposed business plans for restaurants in Oslo, or in investigating sociological claims about global food culture, then it might well be worth hashing this out. Some quantificational forces are better than others for purposes of conversing about topics like these. This illustrates an important point: that whether it is correct to interpret a dispute *as* a metalinguistic

negotiation is one question, whereas the question of whether the dispute is an important one worth engaging in is another.³³ An affirmative answer to the former question doesn't depend on the idea that the dispute is one worth engaging in – let alone any particular account of *why* it is, if indeed it is. While bearing it in mind, we won't belabor this point for each of the following examples.

Now consider the following example:

PIZZA 3: Metalinguistic Negotiation of Domain Restriction

- (21) Norwegians like pizza.
- (22) No, you're wrong. Norwegian infants and severely lactose intolerant Norwegians don't like pizza at all!

Here again is a dialogue that we can imagine taking place even in a context where, fantastically, the exact number and identity of Norwegians who like pizza is mutually known to the speakers.³⁴ So the dispute does not express a disagreement about the non-linguistic facts concerning how many or which Norwegians like pizza. And like the example PIZZA 2 above, neither is it plausibly thought of as a disagreement about the definition of 'Norwegian'. What the disagreement in PIZZA 3 really hinges on is *which Norwegians* the generalization ought to apply to. The speaker of (21) intends a generalization whose domain includes—roughly speaking—Norwegians who are developmentally and physiologically well situated to enjoy pizza. With her insistence that the generalization is counter-exemplified by very young or lactose intolerant individuals, the speaker of (22) stumps for a less restricted domain, one that presumably would contain almost all living Norwegians at least.

We now turn to our final example involving Norwegians and Pizza:

PIZZA 4: Metalinguistic Negotiation of Lexical Restriction

- (23) Norwegians like pizza.
- (24) No, you're wrong. Of course, almost all Norwegians like pizza. But *everybody* likes pizza! There's nothing special about being Norwegian and liking pizza.

³³ See (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a) for emphasis on this point.

³⁴ We could make it slightly less fantastic by imagining instead simply that it is mutually known roughly what proportion of Norwegians like pizza, and that basic facts about which subpopulations are unlikely to like pizza for obvious reasons are part of the conversational common ground. It won't affect the argument either way, but the point is more vivid the more exact we imagine the agreement on non-linguistic facts to be.

In PIZZA 4—just as in the previous two scenarios—it’s clear that the number or proportion of Norwegians who like pizza is not what’s at issue here. In this case, the speakers explicitly agree that (a portion sufficiently close to) *all* of the (contextually restricted domain of) Norwegians like pizza. So they don’t disagree about the non-linguistic facts—or at least the non-linguistic facts specifically about actual people and their actual liking of pizza. They don’t disagree about the quantificational force of *Gen*. And they don’t disagree about the domain restriction for *Gen*. They certainly don’t disagree in any relevant sense about the definition of ‘Norwegian’. So what’s left for the disagreement to center on?

As described above in Section 2, the “lexical restriction” feature of *Gen*’s meaning is meant to capture the fact that, depending on the context, generics can serve to attach a certain kind of modal force to the generalization they express. They can—though they need not—express that the generalization describes a feature that is in some sense essential to the members of, or constitutive of membership in, the group denoted by the generic itself.

Given this feature of generics, the dispute in PIZZA 4 *could* be interpreted as a canonical dispute. On one possible continuation of the conversation, we could imagine the speaker of (23) standing her ground—allowing that her claim was indeed meant to express a deep fact about Norwegians, and insisting that she was right to make such a claim. Such a dispute might well be best understood as a canonical dispute: namely, one where speakers literally express conflicting views about the truth of the claim in (23), where that claim expresses a generalization about, very roughly speaking, what makes someone a “real Norwegian” when it comes to liking pizza.

But it’s equally easy to imagine the dispute continuing in quite a different way. We could imagine the speaker of (23) agreeing with speaker of (24) that *of course* everyone likes pizza and so *of course* liking pizza isn’t a special feature of being Norwegian, but insisting nevertheless that given those facts, it was perfectly correct to say that Norwegians like pizza. If the dispute continues in this way, then we have the following situation: the speakers agree on the non-linguistic facts—including not just who likes pizza, but also whether that liking is in any way modally special. They

also tacitly agree (to a close enough approximation) on the quantificational force of the generalization, and (to a close enough approximation) on the domain restriction. What they disagree about is what the lexical restriction of *Gen* ought to be, relative to the context.³⁵

Is this a context where it is appropriate for a generalization to aim at capturing something quasi-essential about the group under description? If so, then a contextual resolution of the content of *Gen* on which the statement in (23) is *false* is most appropriate. Or is it a context in which it is appropriate simply for the generalization to accurately characterize the contingent facts at the actual world? If so, then a contextual resolution of the content of *Gen* on which the statement in (23) is *true* is most appropriate. The speakers' debate about whether (23) is true or false expresses their disagreement about whether this is a situation where we should be trying to make quasi-essentialist claims about nationalities and their tastes. As in the above cases, the answers to those questions will depend on why the speakers of (23) and (24) are having the conversation in the first place. But either way, it is clear—we submit—that the dispute itself is plausibly analyzed as a negotiation of how best to resolve the content of *Gen*, relative to the context. And that the existence this type of case is precisely what you would predict if you believed that *Gen* was context sensitive with respect to its lexical restriction.

3.2. Negotiation Over the Context-Independent Meaning of *Gen*?

Recall our earlier discussion of two different kinds of metalinguistic disputes: those that focus on some context-sensitive aspect of meaning (e.g., a context-sensitive threshold) vs. those that focus on the underlying context-insensitive meaning of the term (what, drawing on Kaplan, we can call the “character” of a term). As we have seen, it's possible for speakers to engage in metalinguistic

³⁵ Note that, as we emphasized earlier, it's also possible that speakers have mistaken self-interpretations of their own activity. Thus, even in cases where speakers say things that seem to involve the denial of the idea that they are engaged in a metalinguistic negotiation (as in the previous reading of PIZZA 4), this might be wrong. Moreover, as Plunkett and Sundell bring out in other work, disputes wherein speakers claim that they are fundamentally engaged in arguments about what X “really is” (such as what “morality really is”, or “freedom really is”), might best be interpreted at the end of the day as metalinguistic negotiations. (See (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a) and (Plunkett 2015)). Thus, even if the dispute in PIZZA 4 doesn't end up proceeding in this alternative way, and instead goes in the former way, the metalinguistic analysis of this case might still be correct.

negotiations over the character of a term, in which speakers advocate for rival meanings to be paired with a given lexical item. For example, this is how Plunkett and Sundell propose to understand Ludlow's Secretariat example. In short, in that case, the idea is that one speaker puts forward a view in which 'athlete' should mean something (at least for the context at hand) that includes horses in its extension, whereas the other denies it. In that case, as Plunkett and Sundell underscore, we can easily imagine how certain non-linguistic issues are tied to the question of which of two rival meanings to use (or, put another way, which of two rival concepts the term should express). For example, maybe one speaker thinks issues about the ethical treatment of racehorses rides on it, given the positive resonance the term 'athlete' has in our culture and what it might therefore mean to categorize some horses as athletes.³⁶

This example – and others like it, which Plunkett and Sundell discuss in their work – brings out an interesting question: are there metalinguistic negotiations involving generics wherein speakers attempt to change the context-insensitive meaning of *Gen*? In theory, we think such uses are possible, but probably not that frequent.

On the possibility side, consider that a speaker could use basically *any* given term in any number of ways that departs from ordinary usage as part of an effort to advocate for a new meaning of the term. For example, a speaker might use the term 'frog' in a metalinguistic way on which it refers only to laptops. Many such "revolutionary" usages might not make much sense, might not have much uptake, and might be defective in any number of ways (e.g., leading to lots of confusion given massive departure from current usage). But there is nothing in principle ruling them out. And, indeed, in some cases, there might well be good reasons to go in for revolutionary proposals about the currently context-insensitive meaning of a given term – or at least ones that radically reform that meaning of a term in a given way. For example, doing so might bring certain epistemic benefits to our scientific theorizing or allow us to accomplish important social/political aims.³⁷ In any case,

36 See (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a) for further discussion.

37 See (Burgess and Plunkett 2013) and (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020) overviews of some cases that (at least some philosophers) have thought fit this bill, including, for example, (Haslanger 2000)'s revolutionary proposals on gender and race terms, and (Scharp 2013)'s proposals about 'truth'.

whether it makes sense to engage in such metalinguistic proposals is one thing, and the possibility of doing so is another. If it's *possible* to do so for terms in general, it should also be true for quantifiers and other aspects of our language.

But now consider just what it would mean to engage in “revolutionary” usage of something akin to the “character” of *Gen* (i.e. its context-insensitive meaning). If Sterken’s view is correct, *Gen* is highly context-sensitive, across multiple different dimensions. Thus, a wide range of different uses are possible on it in different contexts, *holding fixed* the context-insensitive meaning of *Gen*. Given this, it’s not clear what motivations speakers would have for pushing a truly revolutionary usage of the context-insensitive meaning of *Gen* – or even one that was even just slightly “reforming” of its context-insensitive meaning. Perhaps because of this, we don’t think we find many such metalinguistic negotiations involving *Gen* that revolve around its context-insensitive meaning.

This isn’t to deny, however, that some metalinguistic negotiations involving generics can aim to push around conventions in significant ways that can be fairly “revolutionary” in the sense of significantly changing what a word means in a given context, even if the context-invariant meaning of the term isn’t targeted. For example, in a given context, the conventional norms around how to fill out one or more of the various context-sensitive parameters might be relatively well-established or even calcified. In such a case, departures from them might well seem like a serious break to participants or to theorists – perhaps one that is seen as “revolutionary” if not at least significantly reforming.³⁸ This can be so even if such breaks are consistent with the context-insensitive meaning of the *Gen*, as understood on Sterken’s theory. This brings out a general point: the issues of which aspect of a term’s meaning a metalinguistic negotiation is about (e.g., the character of a term vs. context-sensitive parameter A vs. context-sensitive parameter B etc.) is one issue, whereas how “revolutionary” (or how radically reforming) a proposal is with respect to that aspect of meaning is another.

³⁸ Note that it’s unclear whether we should think there is a difference in kind between “revolutionary” and “reforming” proposals, or whether it’s just a matter of degree. We don’t need to take a stand on that issue for our purposes in this paper.

Given the sort of flexibility that is built into *Gen* on Sterken’s contextualist view, we can predict (as we’ve seen above) many different ways speakers can negotiate over the meaning of *Gen* given the context-sensitive parameters involved in that meaning. Those context-sensitive dimensions point to places where *Gen* is flexible. When we have identified points of flexibility with a term, we’d, in general, expect metalinguistic negotiation to be something that would occur around those very points of flexibility – especially in contexts where there is kinds of ambiguity that need to be resolved around it for communication to go smoothly. This is exactly what we see in the cases we canvassed above. In turn, in contexts where the norms around how to fill out the relevant context-sensitive parameters are more settled, we might see less metalinguistic negotiation going on at those points – and it would seem more radical to participants (or to theorists) to try to do so. Nonetheless, were metalinguistic negotiation to happen in those conversations, we’d still have some sense of *which aspects* of meaning metalinguistic negotiation is likely to happen and what it might look like – especially in contexts where speakers have a stake in challenging the default ways in which those context-sensitive aspects of meaning have been previously settled. We think it is a theoretical advantage of the package deal of Sterken’s contextualist view combined with the idea of metalinguistic negotiation that it is able to identify these points in an illuminating way. Put another way, Sterken’s view helps us see aspects of meaning that will often strike speakers as relatively “apt” for negotiation (following norms of conversation and the existing context-insensitive meanings of terms), and thus help us both predict and explain the relevant linguistic patterns we see around the metalinguistic negotiation of generics. In contrast, as we will explore more in §4, other views of generics have to posit consistently more “revolutionary” uses of generics that target the (purportedly) context-invariant meaning of generics to explain the relevant cases we’ve introduced in this section. While possible, this comes at theoretical cost to posit happens consistently, which seems more of a forced reading of what is going on in these cases.

In conclusion to this section, we’d like to close by connecting an important point about what it means for an aspect of a term’s meaning to be “negotiable”. By this, we mean it is the kind of thing that will be apt for normative argument about

how it should be settled, such that we predict speakers will engage in normative argument over it. But that doesn't mean that such normative argument will be successful in leading to an agreement among the speakers. Nor does it mean that speakers will approach the dispute with a mutual commitment to trying to come to a resolution.³⁹ In some normative metalinguistic disputes, a speaker might well have a good shot of convincing her interlocutors of her normative views. But in other ones – such as ones where the interlocutor has strong reasons behind her own views, or strong practical interests in not ceding ground – speakers shouldn't expect success in convincing their opponents, or even coming to a compromise of any kind.

One factor that might well matter here for how successful a speaker might be at convincing her opponents, and then (perhaps) actually leading to a shift in meaning in the context at hand, concerns a feature of context-sensitive terms that has been noted in multiple different contexts in recent philosophy. This is that, other things being equal, it can be harder to “lower” rather than “raise” context-sensitive standards in a conversation for what it takes to fall under that context-sensitive term. This kind of idea shows up, for example, in David Lewis's discussion of a context-sensitive account of “knowledge” claims. In short, Lewis argues that once the standards for what it takes to “know” something have been raised (e.g., in a philosophy seminar room, discussing external world skepticism) it's hard to lower them back to the weaker standards we use in everyday discussion (e.g., such as when discussing whether one knows where one's friend lives). Or, put more carefully, he argues that it is comparatively harder to lower them (once the threshold has been raised) than it is to raise them (starting with low standards). We aren't convinced that this kind of pattern holds across the board with context-sensitive elements of context-sensitive terms. But we also think there is *something* to it, at least for certain context-sensitive terms. If so, this suggests that for metalinguistic negotiation over a context-sensitive element of a context-sensitive term, one thing that might make it hard for a speaker to have her view be successful is whether or not she is trying to lower or raise relevant standards for application. For generics, we think this pattern

³⁹ Recall: ‘metalinguistic negotiation’ is introduced as a technical term equivalent to ‘normative metalinguistic dispute’. So, one should not get fixated on certain resonances of the term ‘negotiation’ that might imply a certain kind of cooperative commitment to reaching a resolution.

often holds (even if not across the board). That is: we think it is often harder for speakers to lower the standards for quantificational force, lexical restriction, and contextual domain restriction than it is to raise them. For example, once conversational practice in a given context establishes that the relevant generics about Xs target something close to a universal generalization about Xs, it can be hard to lower the standards such that they only are understood as applying to something like a salient subgroup of Xs.

3.3. Some Observations about The Stakes of Metalinguistic Negotiation About Generics.

Thus far, we've been presenting the view of generics we favor – the view that combines Sterken's contextualist account with Plunkett and Sundell's work on metalinguistic negotiation – using mostly examples about relatively trivial topics, such as whether Norwegians like pizza or which cupcakes are tasty. However, as we have seen, even when speakers are talking about such intuitively trivial topics as pizza and cupcakes, there can sometimes be good reason for speakers to engage in metalinguistic negotiation. As we've pointed out, in certain contexts, there can be a range of important issues – including ones that aren't directly about language or other representational-level issues – that tie into the use of the words which speakers might be invested in (and which they might have normative reason to be invested in, in that context). For example, as we've discussed, speakers talking about whether “Norwegians like pizza” might be writing an essay on gustatory trends in the Scandinavian nations for a travel guide, and speakers making claims about which cupcakes are tasty might need to make business decisions about which cupcakes to make for their restaurant. The general point here, which Plunkett and Sundell emphasize throughout their work, is that how we use words is often bound up with “object-level” issues, rather than issues with “representational-level” issues involving thought and talk. In turn, normative issues about what we mean by our words, such as questions about which of a range of rival concepts to pair with a given word at issue, are often bound up with normative issues concerning those non-representational issues. The same point is true for our use of *Gen* as well, which we can see even just looking at claims about pizza.

With this basic idea in hand, we briefly want to underscore some of why this point matters for when we turn to disputes involving generics that concern weightier matters than pizza. On our view, different specific conversations, with different aims of speakers involved (perhaps conflicting with each other), and different norms/values guiding the conversation, can lead to different reasons *why* speakers might want to negotiate generics in that conversation. With that in mind, our aim here thus isn't to provide anything like an exhaustive survey of how these issues play out in different domains. Rather, it is to provide a few examples that help underscore the explanatory strength of our account, when one starts to apply it to a wider range of cases.

To start with, consider that people engaged in theoretical inquiry of various forms (ranging from biology to sociology to philosophy) frequently make claims about generics in their work, such as, for example, in advancing explanations of various kinds. For any given such project, we can ask what kinds of claims about generics would be fruitful, and why. For example, we can ask, given our aims in providing a sociological explanation of income inequality in the USA, what kinds of generic claims would be helpful, and why. Different views about what a good sociological explanation would be here, or different views about what the actual sociological patterns are like, might well tie into different views that speakers have about how to set the three indexical components that Sterken identifies which help fix the semantic value of the generic operator, *Gen*, relative to a context (namely, its quantificational force, lexical restriction, and contextual domain restriction). In such cases, we'd expect there to be metalinguistic negotiation around precisely those dimensions of *Gen*.

Now turn to everyday speech about matters of social/political importance, such as claims about social groups. Sterken's view suggests some natural places we'd expect metalinguistic negotiation to happen in such conversations. To illustrate, consider an example, tied to one of the indexical components of Sterken's theory.

QUANTIFICATIONAL FORCE EXAMPLE:

(Adapted from the 2013 tweet by @sassycrass)

A: (25) Men and boys are socially instructed to not listen to us. They are taught to interrupt us when we...

B: (26) Excuse me. Not ALL men.

In this example, speaker B challenges – in a way that might obviously strike speaker A, and some observers, as more than a bit ironic if speaker B is a man – the quantificational force of the generic that speaker A uses.

Above, we've given some general reasons why speakers might be invested in engaging in metalinguistic negotiation, and also why they might be responding to important normative considerations in being so invested. Here we note some important reasons why it is that generics, in particular, are representations worth negotiating about.

The first such reason is their *social epistemological role*. Empirical work by Andrei Cimpian and Rose Scott suggests that subjects assume that generic knowledge is widely shared, so that there is some form of higher-order confirmation and recognition of the important status of the representation in encoding our general knowledge.⁴⁰ Tacit recognition of this status may give speakers reasons to think that it's especially important to get the content of our assertions of generics "right".

The second reason is the *psychological importance* of generics. It is widely recognized that generics play an important role in (i) the acquisition of language, (ii) that they encode stereotypes, inductive beliefs and most of our knowledge about kinds, and (iii) that they play an important role in our causal explanations and lay-theories. Given their psychological importance, it is important that speakers reflect on and come at odds with what they mean.

Finally, generics play a role in our essentializing social explanations. They often lead speakers to presuppose that kinds have "essences" and that those essences are what explain the properties and behaviors of the members of those kinds. In the social realm belief in essences is considered to be an inaccurate and problematic way to view a kind and its members. It can lead people to believe, for instance, that women should forego opportunities at work to care for their children because they are women and it's in the nature of women to care for children. One reason, to care

⁴⁰ See (Cimpian and Scott 2012).

about generic representation in particular, then, is that it has the potential to help remedy some of this mistaken thinking bound up with systems of oppression and domination.

3.5 Exception toleration, counterexamples and refuting generics

In closing our discussion of our proposed “package deal” – one that combines Sterken’s contextualist account of generics with Plunkett and Sundell’s account of metalinguistic negotiation – we want to briefly discuss one final theoretical advantage of the view that we see. This concerns how our view interacts with issues about counterexamples and generics.

Generics, notoriously, are resistant to counterexample and are generally difficult to refute. Unlike their universal-generalization counterparts in (xa) and (ya), the generics uttered by A in (x b) and (y b) below aren’t undermined by B’s attempted rebuttals:

- (x) a. A: (27) All Brazilians speak Portuguese.
B: (28) My Chinese-Brazilian friend doesn’t speak Portuguese.
A: (29) # Still, all Brazilians speak Portuguese.
- b. A: (30) Brazilians speak Portuguese.
B: (31) My Chinese-Brazilian friend doesn’t speak Portuguese.
A: (32) Still, Brazilians speak Portuguese.
- (y) a. A: (33) All mammals give birth to live young.
B: (34) No – what about platypuses? They lay eggs.
A: (35) # Still, all mammals give birth to live young.
- b. A: (36) Mammals give birth to live young.
B: (37) No – what about platypuses? They lay eggs.
A: (38) Still, mammals give birth to live young.

There are several features of the content of generics that has the potential to explain their resistance to counterexample and refutation: (i) their quantificational force might not (always) be universal (consider the above examples with ‘most’ substituted

for ‘all’); (ii) their lexical or contextual restrictions on their domain of quantification might already preclude the purported counterexamples (perhaps people with multiple nationalities don’t count as “normal” members of the kind at issue). (iii) Likewise, when generics have normative force (as they sometimes do), counterexamples or rebuttals of a descriptive nature may not carry much weight (if any at all) in actually refuting the generalization expressed.

However, the resistance of generics to refutation seems to go well beyond these basic semantic “outs” – the resistance is much more robust. Generics are often quite “sticky”, in the sense that some generic beliefs are so widely shared that they play a vital role in our ability to coordinate socially, epistemically and communicatively, and avoid confusion.⁴¹ Take, for instance, the belief that *guns are dangerous*, which has all the properties just listed, and of which it would be difficult to give up. One of the reasons generic beliefs behave this way, according to a contextualist view such as Sterken’s, lies in the nature of generic representation itself – the flexibility and the placeholder-like, semantically underdetermined or non-specific qualities of the generic quantificational operator *Gen*, allows subjects to hold on to a placeholder, semantically underdetermined or non-specific generic belief which can be used to infer a large variety of differing more specific generalisations in context. Basically, a crucial capacity of generic representation is that subjects can share this generic place-holding, underdetermined, non-specific belief while they might not share the more specific occurrent ones. When challenged, the placeholder, underdetermined or non-specific belief or some weaker generalisation can be maintained, which of course is a powerful way to explain why generics are resistant to counterexamples and are generally difficult to refute.

When one accepts that there are metalinguistic uses of generics, there is even more in our toolbox to explain why generics are resistant to counterexample and are generally difficult to refute: metalinguistic usage and negotiation are more common in the case of context-sensitive and semantically underdetermined expressions as we’ve argued above. Moreover, the idea of metalinguistic negotiation provides the basis for a further characterization of such cases: namely, we can hold that the

41 See (Haslanger 2011), (Langton 2021), and (Sterken and McKeever 2021).

purported counterexamples and rebuttals may be part of a metalinguistic negotiation, involving competing metalinguistic usages that involve different proposals on how to set or change parameters of the generalization expressed. Counterexamples and rebuttals like B's 'what about platypuses?' might serve to call into question the parameters set by the speaker's initial utterance (e.g., that all mature, biologically normal, female mammals necessarily lay eggs). Whereupon it's pointed out that A's setting of the parameters makes her utterance of the generic false, and that those parameters need to be set such that the generalization expressed isn't a necessary, universal, or precludes platypuses. In this way, A and B can go on to repair the context so that a true weakened generalization can be accepted and entered into common ground. There is also the possibility that A and B don't coordinate and come to coordinate on a generalization, in such a case the debate might remain unresolved or continue.

Thus, another explanation of the phenomena of resistance to counterexamples and rebuttals at the disposal of the contextualist is that many instances of this phenomena are in fact metalinguistic uses/disputes, which are less easily resolved, serve to fix contextual parameters or the content of *Gen*, and therefore the disputes do not concern the non-linguistic facts directly, do not refute or counterexample the "first order" generalization, even though they are disputes. This is added explanatory value for the package deal that goes beyond what other package deals have to offer. Thus, we take our package deal to be favorable.

§4. *Consequences for a Theory of Generics.*

If the cases proposed in §3 are on the right track, then metalinguistic uses and negotiations involving generics are an important linguistic phenomenon. Moreover, once we have grasped the basic outlines of these cases, we have good reason to think they are fairly ubiquitous. Therefore, any theory of generics owes us an explanation of the cases, as well their (at least seeming) ubiquity. In this section, we turn to how a range of theories of generics other than our own can account for the cross-section of cases we've discussed in §3. We examine a range of leading views of generics on offer and raise concerns about their ability to give as compelling an

account of the relevant cases from §3 as our account. Ultimately, we conclude that our view is, comparatively, on much stronger footing than the leading competition.

A few notes are in order before we begin. First, we cannot consider all of the different theories of generics on the market. Doing that would simply be too big a task. Instead, we'll consider what we take to be a representative sample of plausible views from the literature on generics. In particular, we'll consider normality theories (§4.2), Leslie's cognitively based theory (§4.3) and the kind-predication view (§4.4). Second, an important precursor to the subject matter of this paper is Krifka's discussion of *definitional generics* and so we'll begin by discussing his work and how it relates to what's at issue here (§4.1). Finally, this section considers what kinds of metalinguistic negotiation and how much metalinguistic negotiation the various theories of generics predict – put roughly, the level of “metalinguistic negotiability” that a given theory supports. The level or degree of metalinguistic negotiability will be a function of how a particular semantic theory answers the following questions: (i) which aspects of the meaning of generics, given the semantic theory, are there to be negotiated? (ii) how smoothly can such aspects be targeted given the particular semantic theory? (iii) can the attested forms of metalinguistic negotiation we outline in section 3 be smoothly targeted? Pertinent to answering these questions is the observation (which we discussed in §3.3) that one can always challenge a term by engaging in “revolutionary” usage that aims to significantly change the intension or character of the term – in this case, the intension or character of *Gen*. Thus, revolutionary usage is a readily available means to account for metalinguistic negotiation on any theory of generics that posits *Gen*. Though, it may not be the smoothest or best way to account for whatever case is at hand. Positing revolutionary usage to explain the cross section of cases from section 3.2 is unappealing for a variety of reasons. Notably, on Sterken's view those aspects of meaning can be smoothly targeted and negotiated, whereas other theories which need to appeal to revolutionary usage predict that the speaker has more ambitious goals – to change the character or intension of *Gen*, such an ambitious move may not make sense in the given context (e.g., when we're simply talking about pizzas). One would expect revolutionary uses to be comparatively rare. Moreover, revolutionary uses as indicated above tend to have less uptake and to cause confusion and

miscommunication given their departure from the current context-invariant meaning of *Gen*. In a nutshell, any theory that needs to posit revolutionary usages – which is all the views currently on the market with the exception of Sterken’s – to explain the cases in section 3.2 is at a major disadvantage, as this only provides at best only a very forced account of the cases at hand. We won’t belabor this point below, but merely point out its broad applicability as a powerful criticism of other package deals.

4.1 *Krifka on definitional generics and metalinguistic negotiation*

Krifka highlights, and provides illuminating discussion of what he terms *definitional generics*, an important kind of metalinguistic usage of generics. Yet, as we discuss below, the phenomena we want to draw attention to is (along certain dimensions) much more general than what Krifka focuses on, and also (along other dimensions) different in key respects. We can begin to appreciate the contours of the phenomena we are interested in by starting with Krifka’s discussion. Moreover, this will also allow us to appreciate why the tools we need to explain the phenomena that we are interested in will need to go well beyond those offered to us in Krifka’s account. The tools we need, we argue, can begin to be supplied by the resources in our previous discussion of metalinguistic negotiation, in combination with contextualism about generics.

Krifka is interested in understanding a particular use of generic sentences which is most prevalent with indefinite singular subjects. The puzzle which has occupied theorists is to explain a stark contrast in the availability of generic readings with bare plural versus indefinite singular subjects.⁴² To illustrate, consider:

- (x) a. (39) Madrigals are polyphonic.
b. (40) A madrigal is polyphonic.
- (y) a. (41) Madrigals are popular.
b. (42) A madrigal is popular. (?)

Given the contrasts (x) and (y), in addition to a slew of analogous examples, it is observed that it is much more difficult to get generic readings with indefinite singular subjects, and that the generic reading of indefinite singular is available when the

⁴² The distinction is originally pointed out by (Lawler 1973). (Burton-Roberts 1977), (Carlson 1995), (Cohen 2001a), and (Greenberg 1998), amongst others.

predicated property is a *quasi-essential* property of the kind.⁴³ In contrast to most cases of generics, Krifka proposes that (40) is not about madrigals, but about the way the term ‘madrigal’ is defined: (40) is a *definitional generic*. It does not express a descriptive generalisation about madrigals, but rather about how the term ‘madrigal’ is or should be used. This is a “metalinguistic” use in the sense (drawing from Barker) that Plunkett and Sundell discuss.⁴⁴

Krifka is the first to propose metalinguistic uses of generics, however his view was spelled out with the much narrower goal of accounting for the differences in distribution facts between indefinite singular and bare plural generics. He did not have the more general phenomena under consideration here, as his subject matter. In particular, Krifka was considering: (i) metalinguistic uses that are limited to the subject-terms of generics and not *Gen* itself, (ii) metalinguistic uses that do not involve context-sensitivity, and finally (iii) he was not discussing how such uses could be a part of normative metalinguistic disputes about generics. This is not a criticism of Krifka, who was considering a more limited class of cases, but rather a call to extend our understanding of the ubiquity and importance of such cases: metalinguistic uses are not limited to this class of generics. Such an extension is a core part of what we did in §3 of this paper. Krifka does not advance a theory that is meant to cover that full extension. What we are arguing is that Sterken’s view does so, and does so better than any of the competition.

4.2 Normality based views and metalinguistic negotiability

Recall that we briefly mentioned the normality-based views of generics above. The basic idea that underlies both of these views is that generics express something about what is normal for the members of the given kind. *Dogs have four legs* is true because the only dogs that don’t have four legs are the ones that have been deformed by some sort of birth defect or genetic abnormality, or were involved in

⁴³ ‘Quasi-essential’ in this context refers to essential properties or properties that are relatively more modally robust.

⁴⁴ (Hesni Manuscript) argues that we can extend Krifka’s account to cover the class of cases that (Leslie 2015) calls “normative generics”. Hesni’s account resonates with our own discussion of Leslie in what follows, insofar as we agree with Hesni that the idea of metalinguistic usage of generics is a helpful tool for providing an alternative to Leslie’s account of “normative generics”.

some sort of unfortunate accident. Similarly, *ravens are black* is true because the only ravens that aren't black are the abnormal ones – e.g., painted ravens or rare albino ravens.

Broadly, normality views differ according to what they take normality to consist in (for members of the given kind). Pelletier, Asher and, Morreau see normality as consisting in what properties the members of the kind would possess had its' members met with entirely normal circumstances.⁴⁵ In turn, they understand “entirely normal circumstances” to involve the following: no accidents, interventions, rarities, or norm-violations. This type of approach sees generics as expressing something about what members of the given kind are like in the most “normal” possible worlds. In contrast, Nickel understands what is “normal” for the given kind in terms of properties the normal members of the kind possess.⁴⁶ In turn, according to Nickel, the “normal” members are the ones that adhere to the mechanisms which are identified by our explanatory aims. On this view, generics, then, express a generalization over the normal members of the kind.

We'll consider briefly what both these views predict with respect to metalinguistic negotiability and whether or not their views are compatible with the observations we make in section 3.1. Both views predict that the primary locus of negotiation is over the appropriate notion of normality for a kind – namely, over what counts as normal for members of a given kind. However, what this amounts to on the two views of course differs since their notions of normality differ quite substantially. Here are two examples to illustrate.

We can see an example of negotiation over the first notion of normality by turning to a case where speakers A and B disagree over whether a certain historical pattern suffices to make the predicated property normal for the kind. (Holding fixed the idea that a historical pattern determines the “normal” circumstances, and in those circumstances the kind members would manifest the given property – i.e., the generic would be true.) Consider the following case:

NORMALITY 1:

A: (43) Losing candidates publicly concede the election.

45 See (Pelletier and Asher 1997), (Asher and Pelletier 2013), and (Asher and Morreau 1995).

46 See (Nickel 2016).

B: (44) No, that's just something that started in 1896.
[i.e., losing candidates concede (it's not weird to concede) but it's weird to concede...]

In NORMALITY 1, A says that in normal circumstance, losing candidates publicly concede the election. While B disagrees that the given historical pattern suffices to yield a circumstance which makes it normal to concede the election. In the example, A and B can agree on the non-linguistic facts about history and what the relevant circumstances are, but disagree over whether these suffice to make it the case that these circumstances are normal in the context. B says that the historical pattern doesn't suffice to support the normality of the circumstances needed for A's claim to come out as true.

As an example of the kind of metalinguistic negotiation predicted by the second notion of normality – Nickel's favored notion of normality – consider NORMALITY 2 below. For this example, we draw on his own example involving Dobermans, which we presented in section 1.

NORMALITY 2:

A: (45) Dobermans have floppy ears.

B: (46) No, they don't, they have pointed ears.

In this example, A and B can agree on the distribution of pointed and floppy eared Dobermans and all other relevant non-linguistic facts, but disagree over what the relevant *Why*-question being tacitly answered or explanatory strategy is in the given context: A sees the explanatory strategy as that which is relevant to biology and so takes "Dobermans have floppy ears" to be true, whereas B disagrees and understands the explanatory strategy as that which is relevant to dog breeding and takes "Dobermans have floppy ears" to be false, arguing instead that the pointy-eared Dobermans are relevant to the generalization expressed. Thus, A and B disagree over how to set the contextual parameter relevant to fixing what counts as normal, according to Nickel's view.

Such examples are interesting in their own right. It's interesting that we care to such an extent about what counts as normal – to the extent that we negotiate over it and whether it's enough to support the generalizations we make in our everyday speech. Importantly, the package deal that we propose can smoothly account for

cases like NORMALITY 1 and 2 by appeal to negotiation over the lexical restrictor and the fact that negotiations are relatively ubiquitous. What's less apparent is whether normality views predict enough and the appropriate kinds of metalinguistic negotiation to account for the other cases we've considered as well. For instance, how do normality views predict the possibility of cases like PIZZA 2 and 4, without appeal to revolutionary usages of *Gen*?

One appeal of normality theories is that they maintain the universal generality of generic generalization. Two reasons why this is thought to be important are that (1) generics often sound as though they are universals and (2) treating generics as universals helps explain why various defeasible inference patterns in which they figure are apt. As an example, consider this instance of defeasible modus ponens:

(DMP) Birds fly.
 Tweety is a bird.
 Therefore, Tweety flies.

Simplifying and glossing over differences in approaches, the normality theorist can explain the defeasible validity of (DMP) by representing it as the deductively valid argument in (N-DMP):

(N-DMP) All normal birds fly.
 Tweety is a bird.
 Tweety is a normal.
 Therefore, Tweety flies.

When speakers reason as in (DMP), they tacitly assume the enthymematic premise that Tweety is normal (*qua* bird). The conclusion of (DMP) can be defeated if we learn that Tweety is in some way abnormal (*qua* bird). What's important about this for present purposes is that normality theories lose much of their plausibility if theorists play around too much with the quantificational component of their meaning. Thus, any concessions here in terms of weakening or making the quantificational component of *Gen* context-sensitive comes at a cost in terms of

independent motivation for the view itself. But this is precisely what is needed if the normality view is to make sense of cases like PIZZA 2 where it seems speakers seamlessly negotiate over the quantificational force of *Gen*.

Of course, another tact here would be to claim that the PIZZA 2 cases are revolutionary negotiations. However, this is implausible for the reasons already rehearsed above. Likewise, any negotiations of the form of PIZZA 4, over the lexical restrictor of *Gen*, that do not involve negotiation over the appropriate notion of normality, would need to appeal to revolutionary usage – an unappealing option.

4.3 Leslie's view and metalinguistic negotiability

A different approach to the meaning of generics is taken by Leslie who sees them as connected to our cognition of categorization and generalization.⁴⁷ According to Leslie, the mind is equipped with an *innate primitive cognitive mechanism of generalization* and generics “give voice to” this mechanism (Leslie 2007)– that is, the meaning of generics encode qualitative features of the ways in which this mechanism generalizes. The view explains the non-systematicity of generic content (some of which we saw in section 1) by appeal to the non-systematicity of the mind’s mechanisms of generalization. The truth-conditions of generics can be understood as the accuracy conditions of the cognitively fundamental generalizations associated with this mechanism. The mark of generic generalization, then, is that their truth-conditions depend on qualitative features associated with the primitive cognitive mechanism of generalization.

Compelling examples for Leslie are those whose content is seemingly dependent on features like the strikingness of the predicated property, as in (S) below; or whether or not there are any “positive” counter-instances, as in (P) below:

(S) (47) Sharks attack bathers.

(P) (48) Peacocks have fabulous blue tails.

⁴⁷ (Leslie 2007) and (Leslie 2008).

(S) seems true even though less than 1% of sharks in fact attack any bathers, and (P) seems true even though it is only the mature male peacocks that have fabulous blue tails. Leslie has a compelling account of such examples because our mind is biased in precisely the following ways: it is biased to over-generalize in cases where the property in question is dangerous, appalling, or otherwise striking as it is in the case of (S). Likewise, our mind tends to ignore instances of the kind that do not have a concrete alternative property and overgeneralize as a result, and generics sometimes pattern in this way: we accept (P) as a result of the fact that we ignore the female peacocks because they lack some form of fabulous tail (they only have brown stumps as tails).

There's some metalinguistic negotiation that Leslie's view opens up for – consider the following examples involving (S) and (P):

STRIKING:

A: (49) Sharks attack bathers.

B: (50) No, only great whites do, and just very few of those. / No, great white sharks attack bathers, and just very few of them do. / No, it's just a striking property of *great white* sharks in particular that they attack bathers.

Here, supposing that both A and B agree that only a very small proportion of sharks in fact bathers, they might nonetheless disagree about whether it is a striking property of sharks, or just of great whites. Likewise, A and B might disagree over whether or not there are any positive alternative properties to that being predicated:

POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE:

A: Peacocks have fabulous blue tails.

B: But some peacocks have fabulous yellow tails, too.

Though Leslie's view provides a compelling explanation of these kinds of negotiations, it is far from clear that her view in fact combines well into a package deal to account for metalinguistic negotiations involving generics. The main problem is that if generics really do give voice to innate, primitive cognitive generalizations, then it is far from clear why speakers would or should attempt to negotiate such contents. Furthermore, supposing they do, such attempts would be basically entirely fruitless: speakers presumably have little to no control over the outputs and

functioning of the mind's innate, primitive cognitive mechanism of generalization, and so little to no control over what generics can "give voice to".⁴⁸

Of course, not all cases where speakers go in for metalinguistic negotiation need be ones where the speakers either have or even think they have any serious control over the meaning of words, or are even putting forward really feasible proposals. Metalinguistic negotiation involves speakers putting forward rival normative views about how words should be used, and they might put forward those normative views for any number of reasons. That being said, our point is not that any good theory of metalinguistic negotiation need give speakers a lot of control over the meaning of generics. Our point, rather, is that Leslie's view ends up attributing a kind of radical lack of control of meaning of generics in particular, much more so than other kinds of expressions. We don't think this kind of radical asymmetry her theory posits, which, we think, is reflected in the intelligibility of a range of cases of metalinguistic negotiation involving generics.

Her view also doesn't predict the full cross-section of cases outlined in section 3.1. Cases like PIZZA 2 and PIZZA 4, whose aims and outcomes seem quite clearly and directly tied to elements like the quantificational and modal force of generics, which are both aspects of generic content her view rejects. Of course, Leslie could appeal to revolutionary usage, however again this is unappealing for the reasons stated above.

Leslie may have other relevant tools in her toolkit to deploy here. In other work, she discusses a class of cases she calls *normative generics*.⁴⁹ Purported examples of normative generics include:

(N) Boys don't cry.

⁴⁸ Having said this, there is the possibility that speakers are not even aware what generics give voice to and in fact attempt such negotiations in vain. There is, after all, quite a bit of evidence that speakers are not very good at reflecting on the meaning of generics. To underscore this fact, *experts* in the area have spent the last 60 years trying to theorize the correct semantics and there is wide disagreement among them on how to understand the meaning of generics. Further, such attempts might not even be in vain if they for instance they have the capacity to change the character of *Gen* from something attached to our primitive cognitive mechanism of generalization to something else entirely, like a more conventional quantificational meaning. Though this is a possibility, we take it that it isn't a very attractive or plausible one.

⁴⁹ See (Leslie 2015).

The normative generic (N) has a (false) reading whereby it expresses a descriptive generalization about boys. However, its more salient interpretation is one where the generalization expressed is not undermined by facts about whether or not boys cry, how much they cry, or who cries more than who. This interpretation of (N) has a normative flavor to it, according to Leslie, whereby it says something akin to boys that satisfy the ideals for the kind boys don't cry. Drawing on the work of Joshua Knobe and Sandeep Prasada on *dual-character concepts*, Leslie argues that when kind terms have a dual character, generics involving those kind terms are ambiguous between a descriptive reading and a normative one.⁵⁰

Returning to what's at stake here, Leslie might draw on ambiguities of this sort to argue that at least some cases of metalinguistic negotiation – where the disagreements also center on normative considerations (in this case about how best to use a term) – are in fact normative generics, and that speakers can disagree about whether a normative or descriptive reading is appropriate in context. For example, if a speaker utters (N) and another speaker responds that “no, boys do cry.” What those speakers are disagreeing about is whether the interpretation at issue is normative or descriptive. On Leslie's dual-character view, the speakers disagree in particular about whether the descriptive or normative interpretation of the kind is appropriate given the context.

While this account does serve to extend the possibilities for Leslie's view to account for further forms of metalinguistic negotiation, it doesn't go far enough. It doesn't help with the cases already discussed and moreover, where Leslie needs to posit a systematic ambiguity for kind terms (which have dual characters), our package deal can seamlessly account for normative generics and disputes involving them without such ambiguity.

It is also worth noting that generics can express a wide variety of normative generalizations, tied to different kinds of norms. Such norms could range from ones

⁵⁰ See (Knobe and Prasada 2011). See also (Knobe, Prasada, and Newman 2013). On Knobe and Prasada's account, “dual character” concepts characterize their members in terms of both descriptive features and normative ideals. Purported examples of dual character concepts include the concepts SCIENTIST, ARTIST, and GIRL, in contrast to the concept RACCOON (which is purportedly not a dual character concept). On their account, dual character concepts provide both descriptive and normative bases upon which to categorize and to evaluate category members.

tied to legal rules to moral norms to social norms. Thus, we should expect disputes about to arise not just about whether a normative or descriptive generalization is apt, but about which particular *kind* of normative generalization offers the best interpretation of the generic at issue.

Leslie does offer some scope for some normative disagreements, as she contends that we can disagree over which ideals a given kind should be subject to.⁵¹ Note that this doesn't leave enough scope to account for the amount of normative negotiation we propose is available. We can further note that one doesn't need social kinds and dual-characters for the normative force of *Gen* to be the object of disagreement.

4.4 *Kind-predication and metalinguistic negotiability*

A prominent, but nonetheless controversial, proposal is that generics are a species of monadic kind-predication.⁵² On this view, generics do not express dyadic generalizations – quantificational or otherwise – rather they ascribe a property to a kind. On such analyses the noun phrase is taken to be a referring expression (e.g., a name or a definite description) that denotes a kind.⁵³

Liebesman advocates the simple kind theory.⁵⁴ According to this theory, the semantics of generics is “simple” in that generics straightforwardly ascribe properties to kinds. The semantic theory doesn't attempt to account for any of the variability noted in the examples (1)-(3). Rather, variability is part and parcel of a metaphysical theory of genericity: A theory of how and when kinds inherit properties from their

⁵¹ Leslie writes the following: “We are now in a position to understand what disagreement over such generics might consist in. Perhaps the most straightforward case is one in which there is disagreement over whether a particular role is a plausible candidate for being the primary role for the kind in question, and hence for determining the associated ideal.” (Leslie 2015, 128). Another possibility for disagreement arises if one agrees about the kind's primary role, but disagrees that a particular property is important or necessary for fulfilling that role. Two people may agree that a philosopher's role is to seek truth and understanding (or something to that effect), yet one but not the other may believe that knowing Kant's work inside out is important for this end. If the first asserts “a true philosopher knows Kant's work inside out”, the second may disagree with this, even though the two are in agreement over the primary role of philosophers.

⁵² See (Liebesman 2011), (Carlson 1977), and (Teichman 2016).

⁵³ See (Carlson 1977) and (Teichman 2016) for “sophisticated” kind theories (that posit a covert VP operator *Gn*). Similar problems arise for sophisticated kind theories, so we do not consider them in detail here.

⁵⁴ See (Liebesman 2011).

members. For example, the generic *tigers are striped* is true because the kind tiger is striped: the kind tiger has inherited the property of being striped from the individual tigers that are striped. There needn't be any stable proportion of individuals having the object-level property (or other such conditions) in order for the kind to inherit the corresponding kind-level property.

Since there is no *Gen* on Liebesman's view, it predicts that speakers only negotiate over the kind-term and the predicate term, not over the appropriate content for *Gen*. As a result, his theory doesn't predict the cases outlined in section 3.1, and thus, his view does not combine into an attractive package deal.

It should be said, however, that a proponent of Liebesman's view has a salient options here to pursue in pushing back. This is to claim that the cases we put forward in §3 are really canonical disputes that concern "first-order" metaphysical issues, such as whether the kinds really have the properties being ascribed to them. We don't have space to give a thorough response to this idea. But we want to note two things about it. First, a substantive point: it seems to us that pursuing this strategy across the board this will lead a forced reading of the full range of cases in §3. Second, a dialectical point. In this paper, we've been working with the idea that Plunkett and Sundell are on track in their previous work in thinking that a range of the cases they discuss are metalinguistic negotiations. Many of the disputes they discuss – such as ones in law, ethics, and politics – are ones that many theorists take to be straightforward "canonical" disputes about object-level issues. It's beyond the scope of this paper to fully defend the idea that their proposed metalinguistic analyses of those disputes is on the right track. So, what we want to say here is this: *if* it is on track, then that gives us good reason to think that similar metalinguistic analyses are on track in our cases involving generics too. They would be so for much the same reasons they are on track in the other cases (including the kind of linguistic data present, best overall fit with independently theoretically appealing views in metasemantics, semantics, etc.).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ For more on this kind of argumentative strategy, see (Plunkett 2015), which (put roughly) argues that *if* there is good reason to think that a number of everyday disputes among ordinary speakers are metalinguistic negotiations, then so too is there reason to think that a number of disputes among philosophers are metalinguistic negotiations, given the similar kind of evidence at play in each case.

§6. Conclusion.

In this paper, we have considered how Plunkett and Sundell’s account of metalinguistic negotiation interacts with disputes involving *generics*. We have argued that some disputes involving generics are best thought of as metalinguistic negotiations, and that these cases can be illuminating for our more general theorizing about generics. More specifically, we’ve argued that Sterken’s view about the meaning of generics – which she has argued for in recent work, on independent theoretical grounds – is best equipped to deal to account for these metalinguistic negotiations about generics, relative to other leading contemporary views of generics.⁵⁶ We’ve thus argued for a “package deal” view of generics: the view that combines Plunkett and Sundell’s account of metalinguistic negotiation with Sterken’s contextualist view of generics. Based on our arguments in this paper, we think this is the best view of generics on offer. In future work, we aim to further expand on this view, and explore in more depth the resources it provides for accounting for a range of other kinds of disputes about generics, including, for example, further discussion about those that Leslie understands as ones involving “normative generics”.

We want to close this paper by empathizing the following point. Regardless of the success of this particular “package deal” view of generics we defend, there is a more basic lesson of this paper as well: namely, that paying closer attention to the prevalence and dynamics of (at least seeming cases of) metalinguistic negotiation within discourse involving generics is an important avenue for research about generics. We hope that future research on generics further pursues this avenue of inquiry, and that the kind of cases we’ve introduced in this paper receive increased critical attention in the coming years by those working on generics.

Acknowledgments

[removed for blind review]

WORKS CITED

⁵⁶ See (Sterken 2015) and (Sterken 2016).

- Asher, Nicholas, and Michael Morreau. 1995. What Some Generic Sentences Mean. In *The Generic Book*, edited by G. N. Carlson and F. J. Pelletier. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.300-339.
- Asher, Nicholas, and Francis Jeffrey Pelletier. 2013. More Truths about Generic Truth. In *Genericity*, edited by A. Mari, C. Beyssade and F. Del Prete. Oxford: Oxford University Press.313-333.
- Barker, Chris. 2002. The Dynamics of Vagueness. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25:1-36.
- . 2013. Negotiating Taste. *Inquiry* 56 (2-3):240-257.
- Benbaji, Yitzhak. 2009. Parity, Intransitivity, and a Context-Sensitive Degree Analysis of Gradability. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87 (2):313-335.
- Burgess, Alexis, and David Plunkett. 2013. Conceptual Ethics I. *Philosophy Compass* 8 (12):1091-1101.
- Burton-Roberts, Noel. 1977. Generic Sentences and Analyticity. *Studies in Language* 1:155–196.
- Cappelen, Herman, and David Plunkett. 2020. A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics, edited by A. Burgess, H. Cappelen and D. Plunkett. Oxford: Oxford University Press.1-26.
- Carlson, Greg N. 1977. *Reference to kinds in English*. University of Massachusetts-Amherst (doctoral dissertation).
- . 1995. Truth conditions of generic sentences: Two contrasting views. In *The Generic Book*, edited by G. N. Carlson and F. J. Pelletier. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.224-237.
- Cimpian, Andrei, and Rose M. Scott. 2012. Children expect generic knowledge to be widely shared. *Cognition* 123 (3):419-433.
- Cohen, Ariel. 2001a. On the Generic Use of Indefinite Singulars. *Journal of Semantics* 18 (3):183-209.
- . 2001b. Relative Readings of Many, Often, and Generics. *Natural Language Semantics* 9 (1):41-67.
- DeRose, Keith. 2004. Single scoreboard semantics. *Philosophical Studies* 119 (1-2):1-21.
- Greenberg, Yael. 1998. Temporally restricted generics. In *Proceedings of the Eighth Conference on Semantics and Linguistic Theory*, edited by D. Strolovitch and A. Lawson.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2000. Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be? *Nous* 34 (1):31-55.
- . 2011. Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground. In *Feminist Metaphysics*, edited by C. Witt: Springer Verlag.179-207.
- Hesni, Samia. Manuscript. Normative Generics.
- Kaplan, David. 1989. Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives. In *Themes From Kaplan.*, edited by J. Almog and J. Perry. Oxford: Oxford University Press.481-563.
- Kennedy, Chris. 2007. Vagueness and Grammar: The Semantics of Relative and Absolute Gradable Predicates. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30 (1):1-45.
- Khoo, Justin. 2020. Quasi Indexicals. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 100 (1):26-53.
- Khoo, Justin, and Joshua Knobe. 2016. Moral Disagreement and Moral Semantics. *Noûs* 50 (2):109-143.

- King, Jeffrey C. 2014. The Metasemantics of Contextual Sensitivity. In *Metasemantics: New Essays on the Foundations of Meaning*, edited by B. Sherman and A. Burgess: Oxford University Press.97-118.
- Knobe, Joshua, and Sandeep Prasada. 2011. Dual Character Concepts. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society* 33.
- Knobe, Joshua, Sandeep Prasada, and George E. Newman. 2013. Dual character concepts and the normative dimension of conceptual representation. *Cognition* 127 (2):242-257.
- Krifka, Manfred. 2012. Definitional generics. In *Genericity*, edited by A. Mari, C. Beyssade and F. Del Prete. Oxford: Oxford University Press.372-389.
- Langton, Rae. 2021. Silence As Accommodation Failure (lecture notes, available at: http://media.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/assets/pdf_file/0005/37319/HANDOUT_Lecture_IV_Silence_as_Accommodation_Failure.pdf).
- Lawler, John. 1973. Studies in English Generics. *University of Michigan Papers in Linguistics* 1 (1).
- Leslie, Sarah-Jane. 2007. Generics and the structure of the mind. *Philosophical Perspectives* 21 (1):375–403.
- . 2008. Generics: Cognition and acquisition. *Philosophical Review* 117 (1):1-47.
- . 2015. “Hillary Clinton is the Only Man in the Obama Administration”: Dual Character Concepts, Generics, and Gender. *Analytic Philosophy* 56 (2):111-141.
- Liebman, David. 2011. Simple Generics. *Noûs* 45 (3):409-442.
- Ludlow, Peter. 2008. Cheap contextualism. *Philosophical Issues* 18:104-129.
- Nguyen, Anthony. 2020. The Radical Account of Bare Plural Generics. *Philosophical Studies* 177 (5):1303-1331.
- Nickel, Bernhard. 2008. Generics and the ways of normality. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 31 (6):629-648.
- . 2016. *Between Logic and the World: An Integrated Theory of Generics*: Oxford University Press UK.
- Pelletier, Francis Jeffrey, and Nicholas Asher. 1997. Generics and Defaults. In *Handbook of Logic and Language*, edited by J. van Benthem and A. ter Meulen. Cambridge: MIT Press.1125–1179.
- Plunkett, David. 2015. Which Concepts Should We Use?: Metalinguistic Negotiations and The Methodology of Philosophy. *Inquiry* 58 (7-8):828-874.
- . 2016. Negotiating the Meaning of “Law”: The Metalinguistic Dimension of the Dispute Over Legal Positivism. *Legal Theory* 22 (3-4):205-275.
- Plunkett, David, and Tim Sundell. 2013a. Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms. *Philosophers' Imprint* 13 (23):1-37.
- . 2021. Metalinguistic negotiation and speaker error. *Inquiry* 64 (1-2):142-167.
- Plunkett, David, and Timothy Sundell. 2013b. Dworkin's Interpretivism and the Pragmatics of Legal Disputes. *Legal Theory* 19 (3):242-281.
- . 2014. Antipositivist Arguments from Legal Thought and Talk: The Metalinguistic Response. In *Pragmatism, Law, and Language*, edited by G. Hubbs and D. Lind. New York: Routledge.56-75.
- Schapp, Kevin. 2013. *Replacing Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Silk, Alex. 2016. *Discourse Contextualism: A Framework for Contextualist Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sterken, Rachel Katharine. 2015. Generics in Context. *Philosophers' Imprint* 15.

- . 2016. Generics, Covert Structure and Logical Form. *Mind and Language* 31 (5):503-529.
- Sterken, Rachel Katharine, and Matt McKeever. 2021. Social and political aspects of generic language and speech. In *Routledge Handbook of Social and Political Philosophy of Language*, edited by R. K. Sterken and J. Khoo. New York: Routledge.
- Sundell, Tim. 2011a. Disagreement, Error, and an Alternative to Reference Magnetism. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90 (4):743-759.
- . 2011b. Disagreements About Taste. *Philosophical Studies* 155 (2):267-288.
- . 2016. The Tasty, the Bold, and the Beautiful. *Inquiry*.
- . 2017. Aesthetic Negotiation. In *The Semantics of Aesthetic Judgment*, edited by J. Young. New York City: Oxford University Press.82-105.
- Teichman, Matt. 2016. The Sophisticated Kind Theory. *Inquiry*:1-47.
- Tessler, Michael Henry, and Noah D. Goodman. 2019. The language of generalization. *Psychological Review* 126 (3):395-436.