Dual Character Concept Terms: A New Case for Polysemy

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Abstract

The claim that dual-character concept terms are polysemous is often understood to be supported solely on the basis that it provides an elegant explanation of the normativity of normative generics. Understood so narrowly, this hypothesis has been vulnerable to challenges from competitor views that purport to explain normative generics equally well. This paper offers new, independent evidence for the polysemy of dual-character concept terms—namely that they are linguistically marked in other languages such as French and Spanish. I argue that this data puts pressure on competitor accounts, showing polysemy to be the strongest explanation for the linguistic behavior of dual-character concept terms and the expressions containing them.

Keywords: dual-character concepts; polysemy; normative generics

1. Dual-character concepts

Following the seminal work of Knobe, Prasada, and Newman's (2013), the last decade has seen a growing interest in dual-character concepts (henceforth *DCCs*) and the terms that express them.[1] What is distinctive about DCCs is that they characterize groups in two independent (though potentially related) ways: one according to descriptive criteria and the other according to evaluative criteria. The concept SCIENTIST, e.g., classifies people according to descriptive criteria such as whether they perform experiments, analyze data, work in a lab, etc. But it also classifies people according to evaluative criteria such as whether they pursue the truth by systematically revising beliefs in response to empirical evidence.[2] Whether a concept has a dual character can be tested by looking at the felicity of certain statements involving the modifier "true", which appears to pick out evaluative criteria for group membership,[3] and whether the evaluative and descriptive

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[1] For a recent overview, see Reuter (2019).

[2] There is a question of whether this is a matter of one concept with two characters, or two related concepts (see Väyrynen (2016)). Each of these possibilities is compatible with the Polysemy Hypothesis; though many polysemous words are thought to represent a single concept with multiple available denotations, language-processing data suggests that cases in which potential denotations are less tightly related (such as metaphor-based polysemes) may encode distinct concepts. See Klepousniotou et al. (2008), Quilty-Dunn (2020), and Liu (2023b) for discussion. I'll remain neutral on this point, though for ease of exposition I'll proceed with the vocabulary of "dual-character concept".

[3] Note that the modification "true" is different from "good". The latter introduces a strengthening of the descriptive criteria rather than a disjoint set of evaluative criteria. See Knobe et al. (2013), Leslie (2015). There may be other modifiers (e.g., "total", "absolute", etc.) function similarly. Even without modifiers, it is possible to get readings of various expressions that either broaden or weaken the descriptive criteria associated with them. The crucial data point

criteria are independent in the sense that a person can fulfill the former without fulfilling the latter, and vice versa. For instance, Knobe et al.'s (2013) informants found the following sentences felicitous:

1. In a sense, she's not a scientist, but if you think about what it really means to be a scientist, you'd have to say she's a true scientist.

2. In a sense, she's a scientist, but if you think about what it really means to be a scientist, you'd have to say she's not a true scientist.

In contrast, the concept BUSDRIVER does not appear to have a dual character, as informants generally found the following sentences to be infelicitous (though with enough context setting, they may be felicitous—more on this later):

3. # In a sense, she's not a bus driver, but if you think about what it really means to be a bus driver, you'd have to say she's a true bus driver.

4. # In a sense, she's a bus driver, but if you think about what it really means to be a bus driver, you'd have to say she's not a true bus driver.

In addition to exploring questions about the structure of DCCs, theorists have recently been interested in the semantics of DCC terms, and how it relates to other puzzles in the philosophy of language. One such puzzle involves explaining the normative force of normative generics.

2. *The Polysemy Hypothesis and normative generics*

Generics are sentences that are primarily used to express descriptive generalizations about kinds/categories, such as "ducks lay eggs" and "ravens are black". Some generics, however, are peculiar in that they can also be used to express norms for kinds/categories. For instance, while the statement "boys don't cry" *could* be used to describe how boys generally do behave, it is more naturally read as a (rather unfortunate) claim about how boys *ought to* behave. Following precedent, we'll use *descriptive generics* to refer to generic constructions that are used to express descriptions, and *normative generics* to refer to those that are used to express norms (allowing that some generic constructions may be used in both ways).[4]

Though there is substantial disagreement about the semantics of descriptive generics, it is commonly assumed that their logical form includes an implicit quantificational operator *Gen*. One major puzzle, and source of

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concerning DCC terms is that the evaluative reading introduces a disjoint set of criteria from the descriptive reading, rather than a broadening/narrowing of the descriptive criteria. Though see Baumgartner (2024) for critical discussion.

[4] See Leslie (2015), Hesni (2021), Lemeire (2023).

disagreement, concerns how to categorize this operator in a way that explains how generics can be true in the face of exceptions.[5] There is less agreement about the semantics of normative generics—a project still in its relative infancy, and which requires an explanation of their normative force. On Leslie's (2015) influential approach, the normative readings of normative generics are explained by the fact that they contain polysemous terms.

Leslie observes that many cases of normative generics include DCC terms in their subject position, and suggests that their normative force may be explained by positing polysemy for those terms. On this proposal, which we'll call the *Polysemy Hypothesis*, one reading (the descriptive reading) categorizes members of the group according to *descriptive* criteria that an individual must generally meet in order to qualify as a member of that kind. The other (the evaluative reading) categorizes members according to *evaluative* criteria that an individual must generally meet in order to qualify as a member of that kind. So, the two readings pick out two conceptually distinct (but potentially overlapping) kinds, which we might call the *descriptive kind* and the *evaluative kind*. If DCC terms are polysemous in this way, then generics containing them inherit their polysemy; one reading of "boys don't cry" expresses a claim about descriptive boys, while another expresses a claim about evaluative boys.

Leslie ultimately provides a pragmatic explanation for the normativity of sentences like "boys don't cry". This can be easily overlooked, because when hearing "polysemy" in reference to normative generics, it's natural to infer that the idea is that one reading expresses a description while the other expresses a norm such as "boys ought not to cry." But on Leslie's account, both semantically generated readings are descriptive—the difference is that one describes descriptive boys while the other describes evaluative boys. The norm that boys ought not to cry is pragmatically generated by the evaluative reading. This pragmatic inference can be explained by positing a certain kind of connection between the descriptive kind and the evaluative kind, such that the fact that evaluative boys don't cry implies that descriptive boys ought not to cry. In a moment, I'll explain how Leslie's account does this, just so that we can have an example on the table. But it's important to note that the general framework is in principle available to any account according to which there is such a connection. On Leslie's proposal, descriptive boys are *actual boys*, whereas evaluative boys are *ideal boys*. Here the relevant connection between descriptive and evaluative kinds is given by the conceptual nature of ideals, which serve to describe our normative expectations; i.e., for any X it ought to be an ideal X. So if ideal boys don't cry, it follows that actual boys ought not to cry. Again, one need not adopt Leslie's particular analysis of descriptive and evaluative kinds in order endorse the Polysemy Hypothesis or make use of it to explain the

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[5] The literature is broad, but for early, seminal work, see Krifka et al. (1995). For more recent overviews, see Leslie (2012), Leslie & Lerner (2016), Mari et al. (2013), and Lazaridou-Chatzigoga (2019).

normative force of normative generics–for that broader explanation, all one needs is an explanation of the connection between the descriptive kind and the evaluative kind, such that the fact that members of the evaluative kind have some property implies (at least in some contexts) that members of the descriptive kind ought to have it. I will stay neutral on how exactly to analyze descriptive vs. normative kinds, assuming only that a viable account must provide such an explanation.[6]

Leslie's argument for the Polysemy Hypothesis rests primarily on its ability to explain the normative force of normative generics, and for that reason it has been challenged by competitors that claim to do this equally well or better. In the next section, I'll present independent evidence for the Polysemy Hypothesis which appeals to the fact that the different readings are linguistically marked in other languages. I'll suggest that while alternative accounts may be able to explain normative generics, they have trouble with this data.

3. *New evidence for polysemy*

In this section I provide further support for the Polysemy Hypothesis by showing that the evaluative and descriptive readings of DCC terms are weakly linguistically marked in other languages. As Srinivasan & Rabagliati (2013) note, there are two major constraints on the structure of polysemy: conceptual structure and convention. Regular polysemies follow systematic patterns, which are thought to reflect universal conceptual structure.[7] As a result, they tend to occur cross-linguistically. Our hypothesis is that dual character concept terms exhibit regular polysemy—that is, they follow a systematic pattern (evaluative vs. descriptive criteria for categorizing a group). If this hypothesis is correct, we should expect analogous readings to arise for dual character concept terms in at least some other languages.

But constraints on polysemy also involve an element of convention. For this reason, we should expect minor linguistic differences across languages. To see this more clearly, consider homonymy, which is purely conventional. Unlike polysemy, homonymy (e.g., "bank") involves two unrelated concepts (river bank vs. financial bank). Homonymies are constrained purely by convention, often arising from coincidental convergence of etymologically unrelated words. Because of this, Amaral (2008) suggests that we should see homonymies "neatly" disambiguated in other languages, through, e.g., phonetically distinct lexical items. (It would be surprising if the very same accidental convergence occurred in other languages). In contrast, regular polysemies reflect universal conceptual structure and tend to pragmatically originate from a single word. Because of this, we should not expect "neat" disambiguation in other languages. But even with regular

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[6] For alternatives, see Knobe et al. (2013), Del Pinal & Reuter (2017), Newman and Knobe (2019), and [redacted].
[7] For recent work on the patterning of systematic polysemy, see Ritchie and Prasada (forthcoming).

polysemies there is an element of convention involved in their development. For this reason, it is common to see minor linguistic differences across languages.[8]

Both of the foregoing predictions are in fact what we do find: though the polysemy of DCC terms is preserved in French and Spanish, they are nonetheless are weakly linguistically marked in these languages. That is, rather than being "neatly" disambiguated by lexical entries with different phonetic properties, they are more subtly disambiguated by syntax—they differ in, e.g., the kinds of linguistic environments in which they can occur, the ways they can be modified, and whether they admit of degrees:

In English, nouns in copular contexts always require an article, while in French and Spanish the article is optional for DCC terms. A copular context is one in which the subject is linked to a complement by a word or phrase, which is called the *copula* (in English, the copula is often the verb "to be"). So, in English, you could say "Tom is a professor" but not "Tom is professor"; an indefinite article is required. This is not so in French and Spanish. Compare:

> 1. Tom is a professor.
> 2. #Tom is professor.
>
> 3. Tom es profesor.
> (Tom is a professor.)
> 4. Tom es un profesor.
> (Tom is a professor.)
>
> 5. Tom est professeur.
> (Tom is a professor.)
> 6. Tom est un professeur.
> (Tom is a professor.)

What is particularly interesting about this phenomenon in relation to DCC terms is that the evaluative reading can only be generated in a context in which the article is included. This is made apparent by the fact that the modifier "true" (or its French and Spanish equivalents) cannot be used without an indefinite article. Compare:

> 7. Tom es un verdadero profesor.
> (Tom is a real professor.)

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[8] For more discussion, see Kripke (1977), Amaral (2008), Brogaard (2012), Srinivasan & Rabagliati (2015), and Liu (2023a).

8. #Tom es verdadero profesor.

(Tom is a real professor.)

9. Tom est un vrai professeur.

(Tom is a real professor.)

10. #Tom est vrai professeur.

(Tom is a real professor.)

That is, while the inclusion of the indefinite can read either as evaluative or descriptive, the absence of the indefinite article forces the descriptive reading.

Moreover, below we will see that there are interesting patterns in relation to the use of these terms in French and Spanish that provide further support not only for the idea that these terms are polysemous, but that their polysemy tracks the evaluative vs. descriptive readings.

3.1 Spatio-temporal modification

One such pattern, noted by Roy (2013), is that in French and Spanish, copular constructions with an indefinite article cannot take spatial or temporal modification:[9]

11. #Tom est un médecin les lundi.

(Tom is a doctor on Mondays.)

12. #Tom est un médecin ici.

(Tom is a doctor here.)

That is, with the indefinite article, we seem to be picking out stable/inherent properties rather than transient/accidental properties. Only without the indefinite article can we add spatio-temporal modifiers. This makes sense given our hypothesis that the article (can) indicate an evaluative reading. To see why, consider the evaluative vs. descriptive criteria for being a doctor. The evaluative criteria pick out things like caring about one's patients, which is a relatively stable rather than a transient state. People who exhibit this feature, which is important to carrying out the social role of being a doctor, exhibit it *generally*—rather than on Mondays or in specific locations. On the other hand, the descriptive criteria associated with being a doctor have to do with professional activities rather than values, and thus we should expect them to be subject to spatio-temporal modification. One can, for instance, work part time as a doctor on Mondays, or work as a doctor in a particular hospital and not in others.

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[9] Thanks to [redacted] for pointing me to this research.

There are some exceptions that support our hypothesis rather than discount it. For instance, you could say in French that someone just became a doctor, both with and without the indefinite article:

13. Tom vien de devenir médecin.
(Tom just became a doctor.)
14. Tom vien de devenir un médecin.
(Tom just became a doctor.)

Though this involves a temporal modification, the evaluative reading is preserved in (14), where the DCC term is accompanied by an indefinite article. A natural context for uttering (13) would be one in which Tom just obtained his medical degree. A natural context for uttering (14), in contrast, would be one in which he just performed a difficult surgery—thereby demonstrating that he has traits such as patience and precision, which are important for carrying out the social role of a doctor. Because the evaluative criteria for dual character content terms normally have to do with stable states, we should expect them to resist spatio-temporal modification generally but allow it in special cases like (14).

3.2 ESTIs

Another data point that lends support to our hypothesis is the following: Castroviejo, Fraser, Vicente (2021) note that social and ethnic terms used as insults ("ESTIs") in Spanish behave like DCC terms in that they can have both a descriptive and evaluative reading, and that the evaluative reading can be picked out by adding a "true" modifier.[10] They argue for the polysemy of ESTIs in Spanish based on the fact that the descriptive and evaluative readings can be teased apart on the basis of the linguistic context in which they appear. Though their discussion focuses on ESTIs in Spanish, the linguistic data they present extends to dual character concept terms generally (in Spanish), suggesting that dual character concepts are polysemous in Spanish.[11]

We noted above that DCC terms appearing in copular constructions with an indefinite article can take either an evaluative or a descriptive reading, while only descriptive readings are available in bare copular constructions. Castroviejo, Fraser, Vicente (2021) provide further support for this claim by noting that when accompanied by the indefinite article, ESTIs can function as insults by exploiting stereotypes. Consider, for instance, the following minimal pair:

15. Manuel es gitano.

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[10] Thanks to [redacted] for pointing me to this research.
[11] They seem to assume polysemy for dual character concept terms and use this as further support that ESTI's are polysemous. My argument essentially goes in reverse.

(Manuel is Romani.)

    16. Manuel es un gitano.

(Manuel is Romani.)

Because (15) is a bare copular construction, only the descriptive reading is available: it says that Manuel is Romani, where this is understood descriptively. In contrast, (16) is used as an insult, and predicates negatively evaluated stereotypes associated with Romani of Manuel (e.g., being a traitor, robber, etc.).[12] The same is true not only for ESTIs, but for more paradigmatic dual character concept terms, such as those referring to occupations:

    17. Ramona es portera.

(Ramona is a doorwoman.)

    18. Ramona es una portera.

(Ramona is a doorwoman.)

As before, because (17) is a bare copular construction, only the descriptive reading is available: it says that Ramona is a doorwoman, where this is understood descriptively (in terms of her profession). In contrast, (18) is used as an insult, and predicates negative stereotypes associated with doorwomen of Ramona (e.g., being a gossip).

They also note that ESTIs felicitously take degree modifiers only when accompanied by an indefinite article. Compare:

    19. Ramona es una portera enorme.

(Ramona is an enormous doorwoman.)

    20. # Ramona es portera enorme.

(Ramona is an enormous doorwoman.)

This supports Leslie's (2015) observation that, in general, only the evaluative reading of dual character concept terms—but not the descriptive reading—comes in degrees.[13] That is, generally one either is or is not a doctor in the descriptive sense, depending on whether one meets the relative descriptive criteria (e.g., having met the relevant educational standards). On the other hand, to what extent one meets the evaluative criteria in relation to being a doctor (e.g., caring for one's patients) is often a matter of degree. For this reason, an utterance of "he is twice the doctor that you are" is more felicitously interpreted in accordance with the evaluative reading of "doctor".

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[12] This data suggests another constraint on a viable DCC analysis: it must provide an account of the evaluative dimension that includes negative as well as positive evaluation. For discussion and one such proposal, see [redacted].

[13] See Leslie (2015), p. 117.

I have argued that the fact that the evaluative vs. descriptive senses of DCC terms are linguistically marked in other languages provides additional evidence for the Polysemy Hypothesis. In the next section I'll show that this data puts pressure on competing accounts that have been offered specifically in opposition to the Polysemy Hypothesis as a way of explaining normative generics. I'll argue that though these accounts may offer viable alternatives to explaining normative generics, they are unable to explain the crosslinguistic data considered above. But before doing so, however, I'll briefly rule out an potential alternative explanation (not proposed in the literature, to my knowledge) of this cross-linguistic data.

3.3 Alternative explanation for the cross-linguistic data

One might suggest that the cross-linguistic data could be explained by hypothesizing that the indefinite article functions as a coercion operator which forces an evaluative reading of the noun. There are two considerations against this hypothesis.[14]

First, if the indefinite article were doing the work, we'd expect constructions of "is a [noun]" to generate evaluative readings across the board. Instead, only the descriptive readings are available when the noun is not a DCC term, as in the following:

> 21. Juan es un albañil.
> (Juan is a builder.)
> 22. Jean est un chauffeur d'autobus.
> (Jean is a busdriver.)

Moreover, the evaluative reading is available in constructions that include DCC terms but lack an indefinite article. For instance, Castroviejo, Fraser, Vicente (2021) note that the evaluative reading of ESTIs can be generated by an N1 of an N2 construction, such as:

> 23. La socialista de la vecina
> (That socialist of a neighbor)

In French, evaluative readings are available for exclamatives involving DCC terms but lacking indefinite articles, such as:

> 24. Quel enfant!
> (What a child!)

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[14] I'm indebted to an anonymous referee for help with this discussion.

Both of these considerations suggest that DCC terms, rather than the indefinite article, are responsible for evaluative readings.[15]

I have argued that the fact that the evaluative vs. descriptive senses of DCC terms are linguistically marked in other languages provides additional evidence for the Polysemy Hypothesis which is independent of the argument that this hypothesis can explain the normativity of normative generics. In the next section I'll show that this data puts pressure on competing accounts.

4. *Trouble for the competition*

4.1 *Purely pragmatic accounts*

Purely pragmatic accounts deny the Polysemy Hypothesis and argue that the linguistic data it purports to explain (which, up until now, has primarily involved normative generics) can be accounted for equally well through pragmatic explanations. [16] Hesni (2021), for instance, points out that normative readings can be generated using terms for social roles that aren't generally considered DCCs, such as *pharmacist*. She asks us to imagine that a manager catches a pharmacist filling their own prescription and utters the following:

> 21. Pharmacists don't fill their own prescriptions.

In such a context, it is easy to get the normative reading *don't fill your own prescription*. Since "pharmacist" is not a DCC term, and there is no independent reason to think it's polysemous, the explanation for the normative reading must be pragmatic. Furthermore, whatever pragmatic explanation used to explain the normative force of (21) can be used to explain the normative force of normative generics with DCCs in the subject position. Since we will need a pragmatic explanation *anyway*, for cases like (21), we can carry over that same explanation over to cases with DCCs.[17] There is no reason to posit polysemy.

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[15] Another possibility might be to posit polysemy in the copula, hypothesizing that one of its senses expresses something like "plays the role of". Analogous considerations, however, point against this hypothesis: If this were true, we'd expect the evaluative reading to be available for "is a [noun]" constructions across the board. As demonstrated by (21) and (22) above, however, this is not the case. Similarly, the evaluative reading is available in constructions that include DCC terms but lack the copula, as demonstrated by (23) and (24) above. This proposal faces the additional worry that it cannot explain why evaluative readings are restricted to contexts that include the indefinite article. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this hypothesis.

[16] I don't include Baumgartner (forthcoming) as a competing account--though he offers a pragmatic explanation for normative generics, he is open to polysemy for DCC terms, thus his proposal is compatible with the Polysemy Hypothesis.

[17] Because of their similar structure, Leslie (forthcoming) calls pragmatic explanations of such cases *mirroring pragmatic accounts*.

Let's grant for the sake of argument that *pharmacist* is not a DCC, and that "pharmacist" is not polysemous. Nonetheless, the fact that we can get a normative reading for (21) will be predicted by the Polysemy Hypothesis, given how polysemy develops. As Carston (2021) notes, the conventionality of polysemous terms exists on a continuum: in some cases, we access multiple readings through pragmatic reasoning, while in other cases—where the readings have been fully conventionalized—they are mentally stored and directly retrieved. The latter cases, however, are almost always pragmatic in origin, and the line between the two is vague; in the process of becoming conventionalized, the different readings of a term may be directly retrieved by some members of a linguistic community and not others.[18] As Liao, Meskin, and Knobe (2020) note, DCCs similarly fall along a continuum, depending upon the strength with which evaluative criteria are associated with a descriptive kind.[19] Because of this, we should expect that in cases where the association is particularly strong, both the descriptive and evaluative readings will be fully conventionalized—that is, the term will be polysemous.[20] We should also expect that where the evaluative criteria are very local or generated in *ad hoc* manner (i.e., no prior or broadly shared evaluative criteria, as in Hesni's *pharmacist* case), the evaluative reading will be accessed on the fly through pragmatic inference. Moreover, the fact that the polysemy involved in the former kind of case follows a general pattern (taking us from descriptive criteria to evaluative criteria) will make the evaluative reading easily calculable when applied to social roles that are not generally considered to be dual-character concepts.[21] In sum, the fact that an *ad-hoc* dual character for *pharmacist* and associated dual readings for "pharmacist" can be pragmatically generated on the fly is exactly what we should expect, given the gradable nature of both dual character concepts and polysemy. It does not speak against the hypothesis that clear cases of dual character concepts are polysemous.

Both the Polysemy Hypothesis and the purely pragmatic approach, then, have the resources to explain normative generics containing DCC terms and those without DCC terms. (They will agree that the latter receive a pragmatic explanation but disagree about the former.) What kinds of considerations could be used to adjudicate between them? One might appeal to Ockham's Razor in favor of the purely pragmatic approach, but this would seem to be in tension with work in empirical linguistics that suggests that most

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[18] Carston (2021), p. 117.

[19] Del Pinal & Reuter (2015) refer to the edge cases as "weak dual character concepts" and "strong dual character concepts".

[20] This is not to say that the evaluative criteria must be the same for everyone, or that they cannot change. See Guo et al. (2021) for discussion.

[21] As Carston (2021) notes, many kinds of polysemy relations are governed by a regular or semi-regular productive rule: For example, container/contents; object/information; creator/work; place/event, among others. See Apresjan (1973), Copestake & Briscoe (199), Dölling (2020), and Srinivasan & Rabagliati (2015) for more details. This might be a matter of learning from linguistic patterns, but it also may be a matter of the nature of certain kinds of concepts, namely that they involve a structure of related information. (See Vicente & Martinez (2016).) It would be unsurprising to find universal conceptual patterns in relation to kinds involving social roles, which would support the generation of *ad hoc* polysemous uses; social roles are functional, and function is strongly associated with normativity.

natural language expressions are polysemous (roughly 80%, according to the estimations of Rodd et al. (2002)). Perhaps if normative generics were the *only* data in need of explanation, we'd be at an impasse until we could empirically test DCCs for signs of polysemy (e.g., activation of one sense upon exposure to the other).[22] But I suggest that, on theoretical grounds, the crosslinguistic data presented in Section 4 tilts the scales in favor of the Polysemy Hypothesis. This is because it can neatly explain why the evaluative and descriptive readings of DCC terms are weakly linguistically marked in other languages, while the purely pragmatic approach is at pains to do so because it faces the following unpalatable options: 1) Carry over the pragmatic approach to French and Spanish, in which case we are owed an explanation for why the evaluative readings are restricted to environments that include the indefinite article; 2) Hold onto the pragmatic approach for English but posit polysemy for DCC terms in English and French, in which case we are owed an explanation of why a disunified account is to be preferred. Until such explanations are on offer, I suggest that we have good reason to posit polysemy for DCC terms.

4.2 Purely context sensitive accounts

Like purely pragmatic accounts, purely context sensitive approaches deny the Polysemy Hypothesis, and instead explain the linguistic data it purports to explain (again, up to now this has primarily been normative generics) by positing context-sensitivity for generic constructions. As before, I'll only take a context sensitivity account to be a competitor to the Polysemy Hypothesis if it denies this hypothesis (see footnote 21). This is because, as we'll see below, it is compatible with the Polysemy Hypothesis that generic constructions are context-sensitive. I am not aware of any such account (though Lemeire (2023) claims that the normativity of normative generics is better explained by context-sensitivity than polysemy, he doesn't deny that DCC terms are polysemous), but it is worth considering as a live option in logical space.

A context-sensitive approach to DCC terms explains the multiple readings of sentences containing such terms by positing context-sensitivity *for those sentences*. Such an approach could take one of two forms. First, it might posit that the context-sensitivity of the sentence is derived from the context of the DCC terms that they contain as constituents. E.g., a proponent of this view might claim that the two readings (evaluative vs. descriptive) of "boys don't cry" should be explained by the context-sensitivity of "boy". Alternatively, they might posit that the context-sensitivity of the sentence derives from something else (a non-DCC term, e.g., or the syntactic construction of the sentence). Lemeire (2023), for example, suggests that the two readings of "boys don't cry" should be explained by the context-sensitivity of generic constructions rather than any

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[22] Thanks to [redacted] for this suggestion.

particular term they contain. For ease of exposition, I will frame the discussion in terms of the former type of account, though my arguments will apply *mutatis mutandis* to the latter.

In order to clarify how to adjudicate between the Polysemy Hypothesis and context-sensitivity approaches, we can draw on recent work from Viebahn (2022). Polysemy and context-sensitivity, he explains, are two types of semantic variability that differ in the structure of that variability. As he puts it, "Polysemous expressions have multiple related senses, whereas context-sensitive expressions have at least one sense [or *character* in Kaplanian terms] that determines different semantic values in different contexts of utterance." (Viebahn (2022), p. 1069) For instance, the word "school" is polysemous; it can be used to designate a school or—relatedly—its members, but it does not have a single sense that functions as a semantic rule to take us from a context of utterance to one or the other. In contrast, the word "that" is context-sensitive; there is a single sense that functions as a semantic rule to take us from a feature of the context (a demonstration) to a semantic value (an object). However, there is no special connection between the potential semantic values of "that". Importantly, polysemy and context-sensitivity are not mutually exclusive. Viehbahn uses the example of gradable adjectives to illustrate: the word "long" has both a temporal and a spatial reading, each of which are context-sensitive.

The crosslinguistic data presented in Section 4 puts pressure on purely context-sensitive accounts, since they are in tension with the fact that the dual readings of DCC terms are linguistically marked. That is, assuming (mere) context-sensitivity, we should not expect their readings to be constrained by syntactic features of the linguistic environment. This is because context-sensitive expressions have a single sense (a character), rather than multiple senses. While this single sense may have syntactic constraints (e.g., one cannot precede "I" with an indefinite article), those constraints will apply equally to all uses of the expression, regardless of its semantic value in a context. What does the work of determining the semantic value is not the syntactic environment, but the context, which standardly consists of extra-linguistic features such as time, place, speaker, etc.

One could perhaps respond by suggesting that DCC terms are polysemous in French and Spanish, but that their dual readings *in English* should be explained by context-sensitivity. As I noted in the previous section, any sort of disunified approach would need to be motivated somehow. Moreover, there are additional reasons in favor of positing polysemy rather than *mere* context-sensitivity. The first thing to note is that, just as far as the numbers go, our bet should initially be on the former; Viehbahn points out that it is hard to come up with examples of words that are *merely* context sensitive, because–as noted above–most natural-language expressions are polysemous. Nonetheless, he provides the following tests, which are defeasible but nonetheless useful:

(i)　　　*Intuitions*: Does a semantically variable expression seem to have several senses, or a single sense—i.e., a character? The expression "I", for instance, does not seem to have multiple senses pertaining to every potential referent, but rather one sense—a rule that takes us from a context to a person. In contrast, "book" seems to have both a physical-book sense and an informational-book sense, and no single sense (or character) that tells us how to get to one or the other given contextual features.

(ii)　　　*Number of candidate semantic values*: As a general rule, context-sensitive expressions have many potential candidate values, while polysemous expressions have comparatively few. (Compare "I" vs. "book")[23]

(iii)　　　*Clustering*: If an expression is polysemous (as well as context-sensitive), its semantic values will cluster, and will not in the case of mere context-sensitivity.[24]

Let's think about these tests in relation to normative generics, starting with the first. As we've seen, normative generics have both a descriptive and a normative reading (whose relative accessibility may vary according to context). Consider "Men provide for their families". Does it have a single character that will deliver either the descriptive or evaluative reading depending on the context (much like there is a single character for determining the reference of "I")? Or is it more like "book" in that it has multiple senses but no single character to unite them? Plausibly, the intuitions of ordinary language users will be on the side of polysemy here. This is not to say, however, that semanticists cannot come up with a character that does the job, as Lemeire and others have shown. Nonetheless, the test provides a defeasible reason to think that the generics in question are polysemous rather than merely context-sensitive.

Now let's turn to the second test: do the generics in question have many candidate semantic values, or relatively few? Most of the generics we've been considering have relatively few—namely, the evaluative reading and the descriptive reading. This result, again, favors the polysemy approach. Perhaps, however, some of them could be argued to have a wider range of semantic values, indicating context-sensitivity. This, however, would not rule out polysemy. To decide whether context-sensitive normative generics are *merely* context-sensitive or both context-sensitive and polysemous, we can turn to the third test:

Here, the idea is that when an expression has many semantic values, these values will cluster together in cases of polysemy but not in the case of mere context-sensitivity. To see this better, compare the context sensitive expression "I" with the polysemous expression "book". Viebahn (2019) notes we cannot group the candidate

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[23] For an earlier application of this test, see Shaheen (2017).
[24] Viebahn (2022), p. 1071.

semantic values of "I" into non-arbitrary sub-categories, while the candidate semantic values of "book" appear to either be related to the sub-category of *physical book* or *informational book* (and possibly others). This indicates that "I" is merely context-sensitive, while "book" is both polysemous and context-sensitive; for each of the senses of the expression, there are a range of potential semantic values. In order to run this test for normative generics, we'd need to find a context-sensitive normative generic and ask whether its semantic values cluster. In the absence of an uncontroversial case of a context-sensitive normative generic, I will assume for the sake of argument that "woman" is context-sensitive. I want to stress that I am not committed to this claim, but it is a live position that can be used here for illustrative purposes. So let's suppose, following Saul (2012) and Díaz-León (2016) that the denotation of "woman" varies according to contextually determined similarity relations (leaving the details aside for our purposes). That is, there will be different descriptive criteria for categorizing women, depending on the context. I want to suggest that potential semantic values for "woman" will cluster: that is, for each of its evaluative and descriptive senses, there will be multiple semantic values corresponding to contextually determined similarity relations. Consider, for instance, a conservative religious context vs. a trans-friendly context. If "woman" is indeed context sensitive in this way, we should expect at least four readings of:

22. Women are submissive.

First, there is the descriptive reading that women (meeting the descriptive criteria in the conservative religious context) are submissive. Second, there is the evaluative reading which says something like: women meeting the evaluative criteria in such a context are submissive. Third, there is the descriptive reading that women (meeting the descriptive criteria in the trans friendly context) are submissive. Finally, there is the evaluative reading according to which women meeting the evaluative criteria in this context are submissive. (Of course, there will also be a normative reading for both descriptive criteria—i.e. that women (under whichever description) *ought* to be submissive—but since all the views under consideration here treat it as pragmatically generated, we can ignore it.) The first and third cluster together, as they are candidate semantic values for a descriptive reading, while the second and fourth cluster together, as they are candidate semantic values for the evaluative reading. In other words, we should expect to see potential descriptive readings cluster together and potential evaluative readings cluster together for context-sensitive normative generics. This suggests that if normative generics are context-sensitive, they are not *merely* so, but also polysemous.

The above tests are specifically designed to separate out polysemy + context sensitivity from mere context-sensitivity, but we can also consider the classic *ellipsis* test for ambiguity.[25] Polysemy and homonymy are both

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[25] Another classic test is the *contradiction test*: If one can, e.g., apply an expression and deny its application without contradicting oneself, this is evidence that the expression is ambiguous. That DCC terms pass the contradiction test is

forms of ambiguity; in the former case, the different meanings of ambiguous terms are closely related, while in the latter they are conceptually distant. Ellipsis tests combine purportedly different readings of a purportedly ambiguous expression in a single sentence; if the result is strange or infelicitous (*zeugmatically odd*), this is taken to be evidence of ambiguity because it suggests that the expression does indeed have distinct semantic representations that inhibit one another. Here's an example from Liu (2023b) using the polysemous expression "execute". This verb has one sense in which it means "put into effect", as in:

23. The tyrant executed his plan.

But it also has another sense in which it means "kill", as in:

24. The tyrant executed his kin.

The conjunction reduction of (23) and (24) elides the second instance of "execute", forcing this expression to receive both readings simultaneously:

25. ?The tyrant executed his plan and his kin.

The fact that (25) is zeugmatically odd confirms that it has distinct readings which cannot felicitously combine. Importantly, an ellipsis test with a felicitous result is less informative; it rules out homonymy but not polysemy.[26] This is because the conceptual distance between different readings of homonymous expressions render them uncombinable, while different readings of polysemous expressions may be close enough to felicitously combine.[27] DCC terms produce zeugmatic oddness in ellipsis tests in English, Spanish, and French, which is evidence of their polysemy (though again, a failure to do so would not be evidence *against*). Let's start with English. In (26), the DCC term "scientist" most naturally receives a descriptive reading that describes John's occupation:

26. John the physicist is a scientist

In contrast, the context of (27) brings out the evaluative reading. Because we know that John is a plumber by occupation, calling him a "scientist" more naturally reads as indicating that he has evaluative traits (e.g., careful pursuit of truth) associated with scientists:

27. John the plumber is a scientist.

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evidenced by (1), (2), (3), and was one of the original data points in theorizing about DCC concepts. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for pushing me to consider classic ambiguity tests.

[26] See Viebahn (2018).

[27] For detailed discussion see Liu (2023b).

When these senses are forced together by ellipsis, as in (28), the result is zeugmatically odd:

28. ?John the physicist is a scientist and so is Mark the plumber.[28]

While (28) could perhaps be felicitous if both readings of "scientist" were descriptive (perhaps Mark has two jobs) or both evaluative, the descriptive and evaluative readings do not felicitously combine. The same holds for Spanish and French:[29]

29. John el físico es un científico.
(John the physicist is a scientist.)

30. Mark el fontanero es un científico.
(Mark the plumber is a scientist.)

31. ?John el físico es un científico y también lo es Mark el fontanero.
(John the physicist is a scientist and so is Mark the plumber.)

32. John le physicien est un scientifique.
(John the physicist is a scientist.)

33. Mark le plombier est un scientifique.
(Mark the plumber is a scientist.)

34. ?John le physicien est un scientifique, tout comme Mark le plombier.
(John the physician is a scientist and so is Mark the plumber.)

The fact that the descriptive and evaluative readings of DCC terms produce zeugmatic oddness when forced together in elliptic constructions is further evidence of their polysemy. In sum, DCC terms pass tests designed to distinguish between polysemy and mere context-sensitivity, as well as classic polysemy tests.

5. *Concluding and Clarifying Remarks*

Up until now, support for the Polysemy Hypothesis has leaned on its ability to explain the normative force of normative generics. This has opened the account up to challenges from other approaches, including the purely pragmatic approach and the purely context-sensitive approach. In this paper I've presented new evidence in support of the Polysemy Hypothesis–namely, that DCC terms are linguistically marked in other languages. I've argued that this is what we should expect if the Polysemy Hypothesis is true, and that it sits uneasily with competing accounts. Thus, once we stop thinking of normative generics as settling the question

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[28] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these examples.
[29] The indefinite article is included so as not to force the descriptive reading.

and instead take into account a broader range of linguistic data, the Polysemy Hypothesis comes out as the strongest theory of DCC terms.

In the remainder of this section I want to briefly clarify what the Polysemy Hypothesis is–and is not–committed to, as the undue focus on normative generics has caused some confusion in this regard. The first is something that I've already covered, but it is nonetheless worth reiterating–namely, that both polysemy and DCC behavior occur on a continuum, and that polysemy usually has a pragmatic origin. For this reason, though for simplicity I've described the Polysemy Hypothesis as being committed to the claim that DCC terms are polysemous, it should really be understood as claiming that *strong* DCC terms (i.e., those that strongly display DCC behavior) are polysemous. Terms that only *weakly* display DCC behavior may also generate both a descriptive and an evaluative reading with enough context setting, though we should expect these readings to be pragmatically generated. Those in the middle of the scale may be in the process of conventionalisation, and so will likely be borderline cases of polysemy.

The second point of clarification is that the Polysemy Hypothesis does not commit us to the claim that both the descriptive and the evaluative reading of DCC terms should be equally available in every context. With regular polysemies, there is often a dominant reading. This is usually the original reading, from which the second reading was at one point pragmatically derived, but ultimately became conventionally encoded. I've suggested that DCC terms are a case of regular polysemy, and I suspect that the original reading was descriptive, which means that it will likely remain dominant even when the evaluative reading becomes conventionalized.[30] While this is a speculative hypothesis that I can't argue for here, the point is that it is compatible with the Polysemy Hypothesis that there is a dominant reading.

The final point of clarification is that the Polysemy Hypothesis is ultimately a theory about DCC terms, not about normative generics. If true, it will carry implications for *some* normative generics: namely, that those containing DCC terms will inherit their polysemy. But it does not, as some have supposed, commit us to the stronger claim that *all* normative generics are polysemous and derive their polysemy from DCC terms.[31] Indeed, there are good reasons to think that at least some normative generics neither contain DCC terms, nor

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[30] This need not always be the case. E.g., the descriptive reading of "seller of snake oil" is no longer in use, though the evaluative reading is. Thanks to [redacted] for this example.

[31] Hesni (2021a, p. 220) suggests that Leslie (2015) is committed to, and relies on, the claim that normative generics are *only* generated by polysemy in dual character concept terms. This is a misinterpretation of Leslie. Hesni quotes Leslie as saying that "Pairs of [descriptive and normative] generics can arise only if the concept in question has a dual character." However, the full quote (p. 118) is "The natural extension of their [Knobe et al.'s (2013)] work would be to hypothesize that such pairs of generics can arise only if the concept in question has a dual character" but she doesn't explicitly endorse this—indeed, she notes a potential counterexample in footnote 5. Moreover, the kind of pairs of generics that Lelie is talking about in this context are not descriptive/normative, but rather contradictory statements such as "boys cry" and "boys don't cry."

are polysemous. Hesni (2021), e.g., asks us to consider the following statement uttered by a caretaker to a young child putting a rock in their mouth:

> 35. Rocks aren't breakfast.

Hesni suggests that (35) has a normative reading along the lines of "don't eat that rock". However, unlike in the case of "pharmacists don't fill their own prescriptions" considered in section 5, it does not seem to involve even a *weak* DCC concept. That is, with the pharmacist case, there is likely a descriptive and evaluative reading, and the choice between polysemy and purely pragmatic explanation just rests on to what extent those readings are conventionalised. In contrast, there is no evaluative reading of "rocks aren't for breakfast" from which the norm "don't eat that rock" can be generated. Rather, only the descriptive reading is available, and the norm is implicated by it. The speaker, Hesni points out, is not talking about evaluative rocks at all (whatever those would be), but rather claiming that plain old ordinary descriptive rocks are not for breakfast. It follows from this (rather than from a claim about the evaluative criteria for rocks) that the child should not eat them.

I want to suggest that Hesni's example shows that normative generics can *also* be generated by what I'll call (following Korman & Khemlani (2020)) *teleological generics*, which generally take the form of "x's are for y" or "x's aren't for y". Such generics are used to describe the function of objects, or—perhaps more often in cases that generate normative readings—to note what their function is *not*. These kinds of constructions are extremely common in talking to children. They are used to teach them about the functions of objects while also doing something richer—communicating social norms.[32] When children use an object for something other than its intended function, it is common to point out—using a generic statement—what the object's function is/is not. This is perhaps especially true when using the object for something other than its intended purpose could be dangerous. For example:

> 36. Scissors aren't for playing with.

An utterance of (36) communicates that playing-with is not one of the functions of scissors, thereby implicating that one ought not to play with them. Though Hesni's example (35) drops the "for", to my ear it reads as roughly equivalent to "rocks aren't for breakfast". Consider, for instance:

> 37. Scissors aren't toys.

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[32] Indeed, Casler et. al. (2009) find that children naturally think about the functions of objects in a normatively laden way. See also DiYanni & Kelemen (2005).

An utterance of (37) seems to implicate the content of (36), which in turn implicates the norm *don't play with scissors*. That is, given that the function of toys is playing-with (perhaps along with the background information that toys are the only kind of object with that function in the context), the fact that scissors aren't toys implies that scissors aren't for playing with. This leads us to the same implicature derived from (36), namely that one ought not to play with scissors.[33]

Indeed, normative generics don't seem to be confined to just teleological generics or those containing DCC terms. Let's think about an utterance of (37) in a context in which a caretaker is monitoring a child who is cleaning up after doing a craft project. In this room there is a box where toys go and a drawer where scissors go. Suppose that the child is about to put the scissors in the box, and the caretaker stops them by uttering (37). In this context, her utterance implicates not that the child shouldn't play with the scissors, but that they shouldn't put them in the box (but rather in the drawer). Here the implicature doesn't seem to run through information about the function of toys or scissors, but rather through norms about where they are stored. When the caretaker utters (37) she implicates that the child should not put scissors in the box *because that's not where they go*. It has nothing to do with the function of scissors or toys, but rather with contingent, local norms about where they are stored.

This suggests that normative generics are a heterogeneous phenomenon, and may be generated in a variety of ways, including by the fact that they contain DCC terms, by the fact that they are teleological, and perhaps more besides. Some of these mechanisms involve polysemy while others do not. But this does not speak against the Polysemy Hypothesis, and it is only tying this hypothesis too closely to normative generics that has created this false impression.

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[33] Should normative generics containing dual character concept terms be understood as teleological generics? In some sense, yes, given that they are fundamentally teleological. However, they are different from what have traditionally been classified as teleological generics in the following way. The latter involve performing a function *for an agent* (or a body, etc.). That is, their function involves being used by someone (or thing) for some purpose; e.g., cars are used (by people) for driving. In contrast, social roles/functions cannot be straightforwardly understood in this way. For this reason, the normative generics that we are concerned with display different linguistic behavior than teleological generics as they are traditionally understood: E.g., (i) The evaluative reading of "men are tough" can be felicitously paraphrased by "real men are tough", but "scissors aren't toys" cannot be felicitously paraphrased as "real scissors aren't toys"; (ii) Teleological generics also easily (and normally) take an "x's are for y" form, while such a form is infelicitous for generics containing dual character concept terms. Compare, e.g., "toys aren't for playing with" vs. #"men are for (being) tough". A related difference is that teleological generics generate norms about how people ought to *use* the object whose function is at issue, where normative generics generate norms about how the subjects whose role/function is at issue ought themselves to *be*.

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