ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Generics and metalinguistic negotiation

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Abstract

In this paper, we consider how the notion of metalinguistic negotiation interacts with various theories of generics. The notion of metalinguistic negotiation we discuss stems from previous work from two of us (Plunkett and Sundell). Metalinguistic negotiations are disputes in which 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, via competing "metalinguistic" usages of terms. Here, we argue 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. Specifically, we argue that the "contextualist" theory of generics that one of us (Sterken) has developed in other work is best equipped to account for these metalinguistic negotiations, relative to other leading 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.

Keywords Generics · Metalinguistic negotiation · Contextualism · Metalinguistic usage

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1 Introduction

In recent work, two of us (David Plunkett and Timothy 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 is.[1]

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*—and should be changed. This illustrates a more general point: we can engage in metalinguistic negotiation in a range of contexts, putting forward a variety 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 one of us (Rachel Katharine Sterken) has argued for

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

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 domain restriction, and contextual domain restriction. Contextualism about generics can smoothly read the cases we draw attention to in this paper as metalinguistic negotiations over the quantificational force, lexical domain restriction, or contextual domain restriction of the generic. We argue that this "package deal"—one that combines Plunkett and Sundell's account of metalinguistic negotiation with Sterken's contextualist view of generics—is an attractive overall account of disputes involving generics that we highlight here. Other rival package deals—i.e., other combinations of rival (semantic) theories of generics with accompanying accounts of the cases we bring to the fore—do not do nearly as well at explaining the cases we present, or so we'll argue.

Our main goal in this paper is to argue on behalf of this package deal in order to help us make progress in our theorizing about generics. 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 areas in which a philosophical idea or argument helps us do serious explanatory work, the more reason we have to endorse it. Thus, if the best account of the disputes involving generics that we highlight in this paper makes use of the idea of metalinguistic negotiation, this lends further support to the idea of metalinguistic negotiation in general.

We break up our work in what follows into the following sections, followed by a conclusion. In the second section (Sect. 2), we introduce the topic of generics, and Sterken's account in particular. In the next section (Sect. 3), we introduce Plunkett and Sundell's account of metalinguistic negotiation, and the overall framework that it is embedded in. Together, these two views raise a natural possibility: that speakers could engage in metalinguistic negotiation over the content of *Gen* along the different context-sensitive dimensions which Sterken's view highlights. We think that this is an apt characterization of what is going on in a number of disputes. In the fourth section (Sect. 4), we make this case, introducing a variety of different kinds of metalinguistic negotiation that we think are well-explained by a combination of Sterken's view of generics with the idea of metalinguistic negotiation from Plunkett and Sundell. In Sect. 5, we then compare our proposed explanation 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 Sect. 4. Thus, we argue, thinking seriously about metalinguistic negotiation—in combination with the other theoretical strengths of Sterken's view of generics—can act as an inference to the best explanation argument on behalf of Sterken's view.

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[2] See Sterken (2015a, 2016a).

2 Sterken's contextualism about generics

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

We start with Sterken's contextualist view for two reasons. First, we think it is the best view of generics currently available, given independent theoretical motivations.[3] Second, according to the contextualist view, generic expressions have variable truth-conditions because they are semantically context-sensitive. Just as, for example, the semantics of a gradable adjective like 'hot' or 'tall' requires that a degree or threshold of hotness/tallness be set in context in order to fix the meaning of 'hot' or 'tall' in that context, the semantic context-sensitivity of generics is understood as requiring that certain contextual parameters be set in context in order to fix the meaning of the generic in that context. This precise feature of contextualist semantics for gradable adjectives and predicates of taste has factored significantly into several of the core cases of metalinguistic negotiation.[4]

If the question of how to set various contextual parameters makes these other expressions ripe for metalinguistic negotiation, that suggests that the setting of similar contextual parameters in the use of generics 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 received significant attention in the literature. We turn to those in Sect. 4, 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.[5] This fact has most often been justified by the observation that different sentences involving generics seem to involve different kinds of generalization. Consider the following:

(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."[6] But things 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 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.

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[3] See Sterken (2015a).

[4] See the examples found in Plunkett and Sundell (2013a, 2013b), Sundell (2011b), drawing on work from Barker (2002), and Ludlow (2008). Some of these examples are rehearsed in Sect. 3 below.

[5] Sterken (2015a).

[6] Sterken (2015a, p. 1).

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 Bernhard 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 the context of a conversation about dog breeding, (5) seems clearly false.[7]

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.[8]

There are of course many different strategies for understanding these cases. According to contextualism about generics, the implicit generic operator *Gen* is semantically context-sensitive. That property allows these cases to be understood in a similar manner to how other semantically context-sensitive terms (e.g., indexicals, demonstratives, quantifier domain variables, pronouns, and gradable adjectives) 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 cabs case, for instance, the content of *Gen* in the city regulation context has some sort of normative component, whereas in the travel advice context it 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 can vary independently as a function of context[9]:

(i) *the quantificational (or statistical) force of the generalization* (so, whether the generalization requires that *all*, *most*, *many* or some other proportion of the members of the given kind have the relevant property),

(ii) *the lexical domain restriction* (so, whether the generalization generalizes over *normal* members of the kind, *actual* members, or any other modally or qualitatively circumscribed domain),

and

(iii) *the contextual domain restriction* (so, whether the generalization has any more traditional contextually mandated restrictions on the domain of quantification, as with adverbs of quantification more generally).

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[7] Sterken (2015a), discussing a case from Nickel (2008).

[8] See Sterken (2015a).

[9] See Sterken (2015a) for the relevant arguments and cases that attest to this claim.

On Sterken's view, these three component can be set in quite different ways in different contexts. Thus, her view yields a semantics of generics that posits a high degree of context-sensitivity.

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 views that understand generics in terms of a notion of "normality", such as the view of Nickel, or the view of Francis Jeffrey Pelletier, Nicholas Asher, and Michael Morreau.[10] 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.[11] Sarah-Jane Leslie treats generics as ambiguous between a normative and descriptive reading.[12] Ariel Cohen treats generics as ambiguous between what he calls an *absolute* and a *relative* reading.[13] And Gregory Carlson offers readings of generics along descriptive lines, in addition to a "rules-and-regulations" reading.[14]

A further strategy taken by other theorists is to hold that the contextual variability of generics is explained outside the semantics altogether. For example, some argue that this context-sensitivity is explained entirely pragmatically.[15] Others treat generics as a species of kind-predication so that generics don't express generalizations in the straightforward sense, if at all.[16]

3 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.[17] They distinguish *disagreements* from *disputes*. A *disagreement* is 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). On this way of using the term 'disagreement', two people disagree in virtue of properties of their mental

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[10] See Nickel (2016), Pelletier and Asher (1997), Asher and Pelletier (2013), and Asher and Morreau (1995).

[11] See Krifka (2012).

[12] See Leslie (2015).

[13] See Cohen (2001b).

[14] See Carlson (1995).

[15] See Nguyen (2020) and Tessler and Goodman (2019).

[16] See Carlson (1977), Liebesman (2011), and Teichman (2016).

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

states, regardless of how—or even whether—they express those mental states in a conversation, a written exchange, etc. A *dispute* is a linguistic exchange that appears (either to the speakers themselves, or to observers of those exchanges) to express a disagreement. For two individuals to have a dispute is for them to be engaged in a kind of activity, such as 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 specific phenomena for the purposes of theorizing in philosophy of mind and 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 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". 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 things. However, Plunkett and Sundell's distinction isn't meant to be binary. 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 expressed.

There are 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. Also 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.

For example, suppose Speaker 1 and Speaker 2 mutually know the temperature outside. (That is, they know, each knows that the other knows, and knows that 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 primarily about what the temperature is—even if that information is usually understood as the semantic content of (7). 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"*.

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[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).

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, such as:

(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 employ *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 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 along these lines. 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 as the *character* of that term.[22] Speakers can either engage in a descriptive or normative metalinguistic dispute about that aspect of the word's meaning. Plunkett and Sundell argue that some metalinguistic negotiations are best thought of as ones about the context-invariant aspects of a term's meaning, including some disputes about who counts as a "person", or what counts as "torture".[23]

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[21] In Plunkett and Sundell (2013a), Plunkett and Sundell introduce this kind of 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 (2021b) 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.

[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 or 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 illustrate, consider the following case from Peter Ludlow that Plunkett and Sundell discuss.[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. They made claims seeming to use the term 'athlete' (rather than explicitly mentioning 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—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.[25]

One feature of metalinguistic disputes involving context-sensitivity is especially relevant to our work here. To see it, first go back to the dispute about whether it's "hot" out. At least at a first pass, the relevant scale is fairly determinate, and fairly simple: it's just the scale of temperatures.[26] So a metalinguistic dispute about whether it's "hot" outside is correspondingly 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 adjectives that, like 'hot', are gradable—are so simple. Following Chris Kennedy, we can distinguish the designation of a threshold on a scale from the specification of the scale itself. At least some gradable

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adjectives vary in both ways. Kennedy gives the example of the gradable adjective 'large', as it applies to cities.[27] Consider the sentence:

(11)   Mexico City is larger than Tokyo.

Kennedy observes that in some contexts, a sentence like (11) expresses a truth, and in others it expresses something false. 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 once a threshold and scale have been set, we will still not have exhausted 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.[28] Characterizing such a scale requires 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 that focus on each aspect of that context-sensitivity.[29] Sundell argues that the term 'tasty' is multiply context-sensitive in just this way. Not only does it require a threshold—how tasty should something have to be to count as "tasty" in this context?—but it is also both multidimensional and highly indeterminate: What factors go into determining whether something counts as tasty for purposes of this context, and how are they weighted relative to one another? This allows for *different kinds* of metalinguistic dispute, corresponding to the different dimensions of contextual variation.

Sundell imagines two speakers, Alphie and Betty, who own a bakery, and are discussing cupcakes. He contrasts three scenarios.

CUPCAKE 1

(12)   Alphie: 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

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

CUPCAKE 3

(16)   Alphie: These cupcakes are tasty!

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[27] Kennedy (2007).

[28] See Benbaji (2009).

[29] Sundell (2016).

(17) Betty: 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. Alphie and Betty agree—or are close enough to agreement—on what's required to count as "tasty". They simply 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 Alphie 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 nature of the disagreement about what it is to count as "tasty" differs between the two contexts, however.

In CUPCAKE 2, we can imagine that Alphie 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. What they disagree about is whether these cupcakes are *high enough* on that scale to count as "tasty" for the present purposes. Since those purposes involve important clients, the standards are high, and Betty thus advocates for 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 smoky flavors, instead of those that are more standard for cupcakes.[30]

The crucial issue here is not whether Sundell's particular reading of these cupcake examples is correct. Rather, what matters is the general theoretical lesson these examples bring out: when an expression is contextually variable in multiple ways, we can expect to find *different kinds* of metalinguistic disputes—differing by which element of semantic context-sensitivity they aim to settle. This lesson is crucial for our argument below. As we've seen, Sterken argues that the generic quantifier *Gen* is context-sensitive in multiple ways. Thus, we'd expect to find different kinds of metalinguistic disputes involving generics that correspond to the different manners in which *Gen* is context-sensitive. And, in fact, this is what we do find. The relevant cases are presented in the next section.

Before moving on, we'll note three further general points about metalinguistic negotiations that will prove helpful in our subsequent discussion about metalinguistic negotiation and generics.

First, in the cupcake examples we just discussed above, we've been focusing on (purportedly) context-sensitive elements of 'tasty'. However, we should note that, as we discussed above, metalinguistic disputes (whether descriptive or normative ones)

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[30] See Sundell (2016, p. 19). In that paper, Sundell argues for a pair of controversial claims about the semantics of expressions like 'tasty': 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 elements of indeterminacy to their scale is consistent with a range of more conventional semantic accounts. Other parallel examples are easy to construct by analogy to these cases, if even that much turns out not to be true of predicates of taste specifically.

can target not just conventionally context-sensitive elements of an expression's meaning, but also 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 multiple times in what follows as we discuss different ways of thinking about generics and metalinguistic negotiation.

Second, in some cases, speakers might engage in metalinguistic disputes self-consciously. But, in other cases, they might well be doing so unintentionally, and they might 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, there should be no particular surprise in a clash between the self-understanding of the speakers and the best theoretical account of what they are doing.[31]

Finally, it's important to keep separate three different issues about classifying different kinds of metalinguistic negotiation. One issue is which aspect of a term's meaning a metalinguistic negotiation is about (e.g., the context-insensitive "character" of a term vs. context-sensitive parameter A vs. context-sensitive parameter B, etc.). Another issue is how "revolutionary" (or how radically reforming) a proposal is with respect to that aspect of meaning.[32] A third issue is which people the speaker thinks should adopt her proposal (e.g., is she trying to change the meaning of the term as used only in her own specific conversation vs. as it is used by a small group of philosophers vs. as used by everyone in Australia vs. as used by everyone who speaks English).[33] We might think of paradigmatic "revolutionary" metalinguistic proposals as ones that involve targeting the context-invariant meaning of the term (e.g., it's character), positing a substantial change to it, and advocating for a wide group of people to adopt this new usage. But these three things need not always go together. For example, a speaker might put forward a view on which they propose only a slight tweak to a term's character, and only for a small group of people, in certain circumstances. Or consider the following case. In a given context, the conventional norms around how to fill out one or more of the various context-sensitive parameters involved in a context-sensitive term might be relatively well-established or even calcified. In such a case, significant departures from those conventional norms 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—even if nothing about the context-invariant meaning of the term is being targeted.

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[31] For further discussion and defense of this idea, see Plunkett and Sundell (2021b).

[32] 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 take a stand on that issue for our purposes in this paper.

[33] It should be noted that this issue connects to the first in some key ways. For example, one might think that changing the character of a term as used by a certain group of people A requires making changes in the patterns of use in a much bigger group of people B, perhaps along with perhaps a range of other factors that matter on "externalist" accounts of meaning.

4 Negotiating the content of *Gen*

In the last section, we introduced Plunkett and Sundell's general account of metalinguistic negotiation. We are now in a position to consider metalinguistic negotiations involving generics. In this section, we argue that there is a range of disputes involving generics, and that Sterken's contextualist account of generics is in a strong position to account for what is going on in these cases.

4.1 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 involving generics. They can use generics to put forward rival views about the meaning of the *kind-term* or the *predicate* that is a part of the generic sentence. For example, 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 situation can be seen as a kind of classic example of metalinguistic negotiation. But it is not a metalinguistic negotiation targeting the *Gen* operator. Rather, it can be seen as an argument about whether the kind-term 'sandwich' should be applied to options that do not involve two slices of bread.[34]

But Sterken's contextualism about generics allows us to go further, and to predict a wider array of possible metalinguistic uses—and thus possible 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 a metalinguistic negotiation. And the prediction is actually more specific than that. Recall the crucial observation from 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 also 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 aspect of its context sensitivity. Similarly, if *Gen* is context-sensitive in three different respects—quantificational force, lexical domain restriction, and contextual domain restriction—we should predict that disputes involving generics can hinge on how each parameter 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.

(18) Norwegians like pizza.
(19) 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 (19), it's easy to imagine that the parties involved in the dispute in PIZZA 1 are either in tacit agreement on the mode of generalization involved in (18), or close enough that the differences wouldn't

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[34] Krifka (2012) considers similar cases, which he calls "definitional uses" of generics.

matter.[35] In a case like this, the facts about the meaning of *Gen*—its quantificational force, lexical domain restriction, and contextual domain restriction—relative to the context, are for all intents and purposes settled. This supports a reading of (18) and (19) where what is at issue is simply the facts about how many and which Norwegians like pizza. It's those facts that are the basis of the disagreement between the speakers of (18) and (19), and it is views about those facts that are directly expressed in the literal content of (18) and (19). To use Plunkett and Sundell's terminology, the dispute in PIZZA 1 is a "canonical dispute".[36]

Now contrast PIZZA 1 with the following:

PIZZA 2: Metalinguistic Negotiation of Quantificational Force.

(20) Norwegians like pizza.
(21) 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 (20) insisting that a single counterexample is insufficient to impugn her claim, and with the speaker of (21) insisting that her cousin is enough to prove that (20) is an over-generalization. We could even imagine—it needn't go this way, but it could—that the speaker of (21) would continue denying the truth of (20) 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 (20) and (21). (Neither is the disagreement plausibly construed as hinging on the definition of the predicate 'Norwegian,' as it hinges on the predicate 'sandwich' in the first example, above.) Rather, the disagreement hinges on whether *that many Norwegians* is a *high enough* proportion of Norwegians to make the claim in (20) 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 (20) intends something strong, but short of a strict universal. With her insistence that the claim is falsifiable via a single counterexample, the speaker of (21) 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 (20) and (21) are engaged in casual conversation, then it might be something of a waste of time to engage in this dispute. By contrast,

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[35] Following Sterken's discussion in Sterken (2015a) of King (2014), we could see this on the model of supplementative 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.

[36] We should emphasize that there are alternative ways of describing details of the context where one gets a different reading of the exchange in PIZZA 1, on which it isn't a canonical dispute. This result might also be secured by adopting certain general theoretical views in linguistics or philosophy of language. For our argumentative purposes here, what matters is just that, given the context as we've described it in setting up PIZZA 1, and given a range of plausible general views in linguistics and philosophy of language, it's plausible to read PIZZA 1 as a canonical dispute. The same general point applies to the other three pizza disputes we describe below.

if they are 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 dispute out. Some quantificational forces are better than others for conversing about topics like these. This illustrates an important point: whether it is correct to interpret a dispute *as* a metalinguistic negotiation is one question, and whether the dispute is an important one worth engaging in is another.[37] 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.

(22)   Norwegians like pizza.
(23)   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.[38] 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 (22) 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-exampled by very young or lactose intolerant individuals, the speaker of (23) stumps for a less restricted domain, one that would presumably contain almost all living Norwegians at least.

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

PIZZA 4: Metalinguistic Negotiation of Lexical Domain Restriction.

(24)   Norwegians like pizza.
(25)   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.[39]

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

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[37] See Plunkett and Sundell (2013a) for emphasis on this point.

[38] We could make it slightly less fantastic by imagining 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. The point is more vivid the more exact we imagine the agreement on non-linguistic facts to be, although the exact amount of vividness won't affect the argument either way.

[39] If you are having trouble hearing (25) as a felicitous, then try imagining (25) as uttered in the following context: the speaker of (24) is writing a guidebook for immigrants to Norway to help them understand important distinctive aspects of Norwegian culture.

speakers explicitly agree that (a portion sufficiently close to) *all* of the Norwegians (within the contextually restricted domain) like pizza. So they don't disagree about the non-linguistic facts—or at least the non-linguistic facts specifically concerning actual people and their actual liking of pizza. They also don't disagree about the quantificational force of *Gen*. 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 in Sect. 2, the "lexical domain restriction" feature of *Gen*'s meaning is meant to capture the fact that, depending on the context, generics can 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 kind denoted by the predicate.

Given this feature of generics, the dispute in PIZZA 4 *could* be interpreted as a canonical dispute. On one possible continuation of the conversation, the speaker of (24) could stand 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, one where speakers literally express conflicting views about the truth of the claim in (24), 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 (24) agreeing with the speaker of (25) 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. In such a case, we submit that one good way to understand their disagreement is this: what they disagree about is what the lexical domain restriction of *Gen* ought to be, relative to the context.[40]

To be clear, we don't think this is the only plausible way to understand the case, given our level of description of it. For example, one alternative reading of PIZZA 4 might center on implicatures involved in saying (24) "Norwegians like Pizza", without bringing in the idea of metalinguistic negotiation as such. In short, the response in (25) might be seen as drawing on broadly Gricean ideas to push back on the idea that this was a good thing to assert: if everyone likes pizza, why single out Norwegians here

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[40] Note that, as we emphasized earlier, it's possible for speakers to 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), they 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.

in the conversation? Given this, one might think that the response in (25) could just be a way of denying a (at least perceived) implicature of the assertion of (24) in this context, without involving metalinguistic negotiation about what the lexical domain restriction of *Gen* ought to be, relative to the context. We grant that is possible. But our point is that it is also possible to see the speaker in (25) as putting forward a view about what the lexical domain restriction of *Gen* ought to be, relative to the context.

To support this possibility, start with the following question: 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 (24) is *false* is most appropriate. Alternatively, is it a context in which it is appropriate simply for the generalization to accurately characterize contingent facts about the actual world? If so, then a contextual resolution of the content of *Gen* on which the statement in (24) is *true* is most appropriate. The speakers' debate about whether (24) is true or false expresses their disagreement about whether this is a situation where they 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 (24) and (25) are having the conversation in the first place. But either way, we submit, the dispute itself is plausibly analyzed as a negotiation of how best to resolve the content of *Gen*, relative to the context. And further, that the existence of this type of case is precisely what you would predict if you believed that *Gen* was context-sensitive with respect to its lexical domain restriction.

4.2 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 negotiations over the character of a term, advocating for rival meanings to be paired with a given lexical item. This is how Plunkett and Sundell propose to understand Ludlow's Secretariat example. 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, we can easily imagine how certain non-linguistic issues are tied to the question of which of two rival meanings of 'athlete' to use (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 ride 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.[41]

This example—and others like it, bring 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 cases are possible. But we also think there are good reasons to think that they are probably not that frequent.

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[41] See Plunkett and Sundell ([2013a](#)) for further discussion.

On the possibility side, consider that a speaker could use basically *any* given term in any number of ways that depart 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 usages might not make much sense, might have little to no uptake, and might be defective in any number of ways (e.g., leading to confusion given the massive departure from current usage).[42] Others, like the Secretariat case, might be relatively easy to make sense of and have relatively easy uptake (at least in the context at hand). But there is nothing in principle ruling such uses out as options. And, indeed, in some cases, there might well be good reasons for even very revolutionary proposals about the currently context-insensitive meaning of a given term. For example, such proposals might bring certain epistemic benefits to our scientific theorizing or allow us to accomplish important social/political aims.[43] In any case, 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 possible to do so for quantifiers and other aspects of our language.

But now consider just what it would mean to engage in metalinguistic usage of generics that targets 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 dimensions. Thus, a wide range of uses are already possible in different contexts, *holding fixed* the context-insensitive meaning of *Gen*. Given this, it's not clear what motivations speakers would have for pushing for a different usage of the context-insensitive meaning of *Gen*. On Sterken's proposal, this would be analogous to pushing for a different meaning for gradable adjectives like 'hot' and 'tall', predicates of taste like 'tasty' or complex demonstratives like 'this cat' or 'that sandwich'. One could push for a new fixed meaning of such expressions, so that 'tall' for example has a fixed threshold no matter the context. Or, one might push for a change in the deictic meaning of complex demonstratives (e.g., 'this cat' or 'that dog'), so that a different conventionalized method of identifying the referent as a function of context for the complex demonstrative is used (e.g., perhaps one could push for a meaning where speakers demonstrate by way of direct pointing with one's thumb as the only method of identifying the referent of the complex demonstrative). Such proposals are indeed possible. However, we expect that they're not that common, not easy to make sense of, and that uptake would be difficult to achieve (especially without explicit articulation of the given metalinguistic proposal). Imagine, for instance, trying to propose the sorts of metalinguistic revisions put forward in the 'tall' example and the complex demonstrative example above, while not explicitly articulating the proposal and only using (and not mentioning) the word 'tall' or a complex demonstrative. It would be quite difficult to achieve and likely unintelligible. Because of this, our package deal does not predict that we find many metalinguistic negotiations involving *Gen* that revolve around its context-insensitive meaning (where that meaning is understood along the lines of Sterken's view of it).

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[42] See Sterken (2020).

[43] See Burgess and Plunkett (2013a), Cappelen and Plunkett (2020), and Sterken (2020) for overviews of some cases, including, for example, Haslanger (2000)'s revolutionary proposals for gender and race terms.

This isn't to deny, however, that some metalinguistic negotiations about 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, recall the point we made earlier in Sect. 3: in a given type of context, the conventional norms around how to set one or more of the various context-sensitive parameters of a context-sensitive term might be relatively well-established or even calcified. This is as true for generics as any other context-sensitive expression. Thus, even if certain proposed breaks are consistent with the context-insensitive meaning of *Gen*, as understood on Sterken's theory, such proposed breaks might be experienced as quite radical by speakers (or by theorists). If the departure from the established ways of setting the relevant context-sensitive parameters in a given context is big enough, such a proposal may strike people as implausible or confusing. We should thus expect that metalinguistic negotiations that involve such proposals will be comparatively rarer than the others we canvassed in Sect. 4. They might happen, of course—especially if a speaker had certain aims (e.g., aims that involve *trying* to disrupt existing norms around the use of generics, or aims that don't place much emphasis on smooth, non-deceptive communication, etc.). But, given the aim that speakers typically bring to conversations, we don't predict that these kinds of cases of metalinguistic negotiation around *Gen* will be the main ones we see.

In contrast to this, as we've seen above, there are plenty of cases of metalinguistic negotiation that our package deal does predict with ease. Given the context-sensitive parameters built into *Gen* on Sterken's contextualist view, we can predict many different ways speakers might negotiate over the meaning of *Gen*. 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 are ambiguities that need to be resolved surrounding such points of flexibility 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 of flexibility—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 center on 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 the combination of Sterken's contextualist view and the idea of metalinguistic negotiation has the theoretical advantage of being able to identify these points of sensitivity 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 explore more in Sect. 5, other views of generics have to posit consistently more uses of generics that target the (purportedly) context-invariant meaning of generics to explain cases like

the ones we've introduced in this section. While possible, positing that this happens consistently seems to be a more forced reading of what is going on in these cases.

In concluding this section, we'd like to clarify a few important points about what it means for an aspect of a term's meaning to be "negotiable". Put roughly, an aspect of a term's meaning is *negotiable* to the extent that it's apt for speakers to engage in normative argument over how that aspect of the term's meaning should be settled. But even if some aspect of a term's meaning is *highly negotiable*—in other words, that it is *very* apt for being the focus of normative argument about how it should be settled—that doesn't mean that such a normative argument will be successful in that it eventually leads 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.[44] In some normative metalinguistic disputes, a speaker might well have a good shot of convincing her interlocutors of her normative views. But in others—such as those where a speaker's interlocutor has strong reasons behind her views, strong practical interests in not ceding ground, or relative social/political power over the speaker—the speaker shouldn't expect to convince her interlocutor, or even to come to a compromise of any kind.[45]

One factor that might matter here for a speaker's success in convincing her opponents, and then (perhaps) actually shifting a term's meaning in the context at hand, concerns a feature of context-sensitive terms that has been noted in a variety of 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 in a particular conversation. This idea shows up, for example, in David Lewis's discussion of his context-sensitive account of "knowledge" claims.[46] 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 can be 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). 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 (when starting with low standards).

We aren't convinced that this kind of "ratcheting up" pattern holds for all components 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 if she is trying to *lower* the relevant standards for application. For generics, we think this pattern often holds. That is: we think it is often harder for speakers to lower the standards for quantificational force, lexical domain restriction, and contextual domain restriction than it is to raise them. For example, once conversational practice in a given context establishes that the

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[44] 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.

[45] See Podosky (2021) for connected discussion about issues tied to control and power that can arise in metalinguistic negotiations.

[46] Lewis (1996).

relevant generics about Ks target something close to a universal generalization about Ks, it can be hard to lower the standards such that they are understood as only applying to a salient subgroup of Ks.

4.3 Some observations about the stakes of metalinguistic negotiation about generics

Thus far, we've presented the view of disputes involving 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 trivial topics, there can sometimes be good reason for them to engage in metalinguistic negotiation. As we've pointed out, in certain contexts, speakers might be invested in (and have normative reason to be invested in, in these contexts) a range of important issues—including ones that aren't directly about language or other representational-level issues—that tie into the use of words in the exchange. For example, 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 bakery. 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 with "representational-level" issues involving our 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*, which we can see even just looking at claims about pizza.

With this basic idea in hand, we briefly underscore some reasons why this point matters when we turn to disputes involving generics that concern weightier matters than pizza. On our view, different specific conversations, with different aims (perhaps conflicting with each other) held by the speakers involved, and different norms/values guiding the conversation, can lead to different reasons *why* speakers might want to negotiate generics in a particular conversation. With that in mind, our aim here 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 underscore the explanatory strength of our account, when one starts to apply it to a wider range of cases.

To start, consider that people engaged in theoretical inquiry of various forms (ranging from biology to sociology to philosophy) frequently make claims using generics in their work, such as in advancing explanations of various kinds. For any such project, we can ask what kinds of claims using generics would be fruitful, and why. For example, we can ask these questions given the aim of providing a sociological explanation of income inequality in the USA. 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 Sterken's three indexical components (namely, its quantificational force, lexical

domain restriction, and contextual domain restriction), which help fix the semantic value of the generic operator, *Gen*, relative to a context. 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).

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

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

In this example, speaker B challenges—in a way that might 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. Plausibly, speaker A aims to express a generalization that captures a widespread and pernicious feature of certain gendered norms of social interaction. The generalization might be accurate in the relevant sense, and well worth discussion—but would, uncontroversially, fall short of a strict universal generalization.

In objecting to that claim—in treating it as a claim that can be counterexampled by the existence of *any* men who are socially instructed in a different way—speaker B advocates for a contextual resolution of *Gen* on which the quantificational force is that of a strict universal, or something very close. As we discussed above, some context-sensitive expressions exhibit a certain "ratcheting" effect, in the sense that standards are easy to raise, and hard to lower. If that's the case here as well, then it's easy to see why a strategy like that exemplified in (27) might be so effective, however pernicious its effects or bad-faith the intentions behind it. For a speaker who aims to disrupt or derail discussion of the relevant phenomena, raising the quantificational standards is easy. Meanwhile, for the speaker aiming to capture what's right about a certain generalization, lowering them can be trickier and more disruptive to the flow of conversation. This, we submit, characterizes effectively how retorts like that in (27) can serve as an all-too-effective means of raising the quantificational standards to a point where useful generalizations are almost impossible to make.

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

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, and thus that there is some form of higher-order confirmation and recognition of the important status of generics in encoding our general knowledge.[47] 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".

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[47] See Cimpian and Scott (2012).

The second reason is the *cognitive importance* of generics.[48] It is widely recognized that generics play an important role in (i) the acquisition of language, (ii) encoding stereotypes, inductive beliefs and much of our knowledge about kinds, (iii) our (causal) explanations and lay-theories, and (iv) social cognition. Given their psychological importance, it can be important that speakers reflect on what they mean.

Finally, generics play a role in our *essentializing social explanations*. They often encourage speakers to presuppose that kinds have essences and that those essences are what explain the properties and behaviors of the members of those kinds.[49] In the social realm, belief in essences is often considered to be an inaccurate and problematic way of viewing a kind and its members. It can encourage people to believe, for instance, that women should forgo 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 about generic representation in particular, then, is that it has the potential to help remedy some of this mistaken thinking, which is bound up with systems of oppression and domination.[50]

Different theories of generics will have different explanations for how it is that the semantics of generics plays a role in these important cognitive, epistemological, and social phenomena. Consequently, there is an argumentative trade-off here with respect to how well different theories explain the epistemological, psychological, and social phenomena themselves as opposed to how well they explain the phenomena of metalinguistic negotiation. Extensive discussion of the trade-offs here is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note that all the major semantic theories of generics do have some reasonably satisfactory way of explaining these phenomena.[51]

Given the distinct ways these semantic theories account for the epistemological, cognitive and social phenomena, it's also the case that these theories will make different predictions about what kind of metalinguistic negotiation is motivated by them. Ultimately, all these pieces should fit together, though it's beyond the scope of this paper to engage this large task. Instead, we want to make a more limited point. On some views about metalinguistic negotiation, the phenomenon of metalinguistic negotiation

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[48] For a small sample of relevant work in psychology, see Chambers et al. (2008), Cimpian and Erickson (2012), Cimpian et al. (2010), Gelman et al. (2002), Gelman et al. (2010), Hammond and Cimpian (2017), Hollander et al. (2002), Pappas and Gelman (1998), and Wodak et al. (2015) and references therein.

[49] See Gelman (2004) and Haslanger (2011).

[50] See Leshin et al. (2021) and Leslie (2017) amongst others. There are different ways of thinking about how speakers should use generics in light of the connections between generics and mistaken forms of "essentialist" thought. Leshin et al. (2021), Leslie (2017) advocate that we limit our use of generics involving social kind terms, especially around children. Anderson et al. (2012) suggest that we explicitly challenge those who use it. Metalinguistic negotiation offers another tool to explore using in response, which might be used in combination with either of the above suggested remedies.

[51] Leslie's view (as developed in Leslie (2007) and Leslie (2008)) is exemplary in providing an explanation of many of the psychological connections since her view is constructed based on these results. Liebesman (2011) and Sterken (2015a) include discussion of how the kind-predication theorist and contextualist, respectively, can explain the early acquisition of generics and other important results in psychology. Sterken and McKeever (2021) discuss how a contextualist view like Sterken's can account for their epistemological, psychological and social roles. See also Bosse (2021). Nickel (2016) includes discussion of their importance in causal explanation, as well as their social and psychological importance.

(or something close to it) will be very widespread, happening throughout communication.[52] On other views, the role it plays might be more limited.[53] On a range of views on this spectrum (perhaps all of them), it's likely to be the case that some expressions are more frequently the target of metalinguistic negotiation—or more frequently the target of metalinguistic negotiation that people are invested in—than others. The important cognitive, epistemological, and social roles for generics—especially when combined with their other features, including their high-degree of context-sensitivity—gives us reason to think that generics are precisely one such kind of expression.

4.4 Exception toleration, counterexamples, and refuting generics

In closing our discussion of our proposed "package deal" of Sterken's contextualist account of generics with Plunkett and Sundell's account of metalinguistic negotiation, we want to briefly discuss a final theoretical advantage of the view that we see. This advantage concerns how our view interacts with issues about counterexamples and rebuttals involving generics.

Generics, notoriously, are resistant to counterexample and are generally difficult to refute. Consider the examples below. Unlike their universal-generalization counterparts in (28a) and (29a), the generics uttered by A in (28b) and (29b) below aren't straightforwardly refuted by B's attempted rebuttals

(28) a   A   All Brazilians speak Portuguese.
          B   My Chinese-Brazilian friend doesn't speak Portuguese.
          A   # Still, all Brazilians speak Portuguese.

      b   A   Brazilians speak Portuguese
          B   My Chinese-Brazilian friend doesn't speak Portuguese.
          A   Still, Brazilians speak Portuguese.

(29) a   A   All mammals give birth to live young.
          B   No—what about platypuses? They lay eggs.
          A   # Still, all mammals give birth to live young.

      b   A   Mammals give birth to live young.
          B   What about platypuses? They lay eggs.
          A   Still, mammals give birth to live young.

There are several features of the content of generics that have 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

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[52] For example, see Ludlow (2014).

[53] For example, although Plunkett and Sundell express sympathy for Ludlow's more radical views, they also underscore how their schematic account of metalinguistic negotiation is compatible with views on which it plays a more limited role in communication than it does on Ludlow's view, and which is consistent with more traditional view about meaning and content. See Plunkett and Sundell (2013a) and Plunkett and Sundell (2021b).

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 tendency of generics to be resistant to counterexamples and refutation seems to go beyond these basic semantic "outs". Sometimes generics are quite "sticky", in the sense that some generic beliefs are so psychologically and socially entrenched that they either play a vital role in our ability to coordinate socially, epistemically and communicatively, or they do quite the opposite.[54] For this reason, speakers end up refusing to give up the generic, not because their utterance is semantically compatible with the purported refutation, but because the generalization is something they're, more broadly, *not* disposed to give up or because overriding social or other norms make it difficult to abandon. Many attempts to refute social stereotypes or ideological beliefs, for example, run into this kind of issue. Other examples include generics such as "humans are the smartest species" and "chicken tastes better than human flesh". A deeply entrenched aspect of our self-conception as humans is that we're the smartest species on Earth. As such, attempts to refute the generic by pointing out the superior brains of octopi may well be met with incredulity. Likewise, moral and social norms around cannibalism and the fact that eating chicken is such a common practice in society, would make it difficult to refute "chicken tastes better than human flesh" by pointing to the scientific flavour profiles of human flesh.

Further, Luvell Anderson, Sally Haslanger, and Rae Langton have observed that speakers, when challenged, will "shift" to a different interpretation of their generic utterance, one that is compatible with the attempted challenge. They provide the following example and commentary:

> Consider:
>
> (15) Latinos are lazy.
>
> Does (15) assert a majority generic or a characteristic generic? Interpret (15) as a majority generic. To combat it, one provides many counterexamples. However, the speaker can then suggest that, although many Latinos aren't lazy, they tend to be—thus embracing the characteristic generic. Instead interpret (15) as a characteristic generic. To combat it one provides evidence that, say, Latinos show no greater tendency towards laziness than any other group. The speaker can then suggest that, although it is not part of the nature or essence of Latinos to be lazy, most are. This slide back and forth between different interpretations of the utterance allows speakers to avoid taking responsibility for the implications of their claims.[55]

The fact that speakers do this relatively easily with generics indicates that there's more going on with the tendency of generics to be resistant to counterexample and refutation than simple semantic "outs" indicate.

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[54] See Haslanger (2011), Langton (2021), and Sterken and McKeever (2021).

[55] Anderson et al. (2012, p. 764).

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. In short, the flexibility and the placeholder-like, semantically underdetermined qualities of the generic quantificational operator *Gen*, allows subjects to hold on to a placeholder, semantically underdetermined belief which can be used to infer a large variety of differing more specific generalizations in context. A crucial capacity of generic representation is that subjects can share this generic place-holding, underdetermined belief while they might not share the more specific occurrent ones. When challenged, the place-holder, underdetermined belief or some weaker generalization can be maintained, which of course is a powerful way to explain why generics are resistant to counterexamples and are generally difficult to refute.

However, when one accepts that there are metalinguistic uses of generics, we have even more tools to explain why we see these patterns in disputes involving generics: metalinguistic usage and negotiation are more common in cases 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: we can hold that the purported counterexamples and rebuttals may be part of a metalinguistic negotiation, involving competing metalinguistic usages that entail different proposals of how to set or change parameters of the generalization expressed. Counterexamples and rebuttals like B's 'what about platypuses?' might call into question the parameters set by the speaker A's initial utterance (e.g., that all mature, biologically normal, female mammals necessarily give birth to live young). Whereupon it's pointed out that A's setting of the parameters makes her utterance of the generic false, those parameters need to be set such that the generalization expressed isn't necessary or universal, and does not preclude platypuses. In this way, A and B can go on to repair the context so that a weakened, but true, generalization can be accepted as common ground. There is also the possibility that A and B don't coordinate on a generalization, in which case the debate might end unresolved, or continue.

Thus, another explanation of the phenomenon of resistance to counterexamples and rebuttals at the contextualist's disposal is that many instances of this phenomenon are in fact metalinguistic uses/disputes, which are less easily resolved and serve to fix contextual parameters of the content of *Gen*. Therefore, the disputes do not concern the non-linguistic facts directly (in other words, they do not attempt to refute or counterexample the "first order" generalization), even though they are disputes. This adds explanatory value to the package deal that goes beyond what other package deals have to offer.

In closing this discussion about generics and counterexamples, we want to note the following. We don't think it's *always* the case that sticking to a generic in the face of a (purported) counterexample will sound felicitous, let alone be a good idea. For example, if two speakers see each other as cooperative participants in a conversation, it might seem overly dismissive for A to reply (for example) "Still, Brazilians speak Portuguese" in response to B saying "My Chinese-Brazilian friend doesn't speak Portuguese". In short, if B was trying to add something important to the conversation, then A's just repeating the initial generic claim could well be seen as not acknowledging that B's claim had any importance at all. In a case where A wants to acknowledge that B's claim isn't totally beside the point, but stick to her guns about what kinds of

generic generalizations are true, a better response might be something along the lines of "Yes, that's true, and that means that a stronger statement than I was making would be false. But the kind of generic statement I intended to make wasn't so strong, and so therefore still holds." In other cases, where A and B stand in different (less cooperative, perhaps less respectful) relations to each other, the kind of claims above seem perfectly felicitous—as, moreover, they do in many cases of scientific explanations where generics are invoked. It's the fact that generics seem (in many cases) resistant to counterexamples that plays a role in our discussion here, rather than the stronger claim that they are so resistant across the board.

5 Comparison to rival views

If our analyses of the cases proposed in Sect. 4 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 flexible, natural sounding, and common. Therefore, any theory of generics owes us an explanation of these cases, as well as their (at least seeming) flexibility and ubiquity. In this section, we turn to how a range of other theories of generics can account for the cross-section of cases we've discussed in Sect. 4. We examine a range of leading views of generics on offer and raise concerns about their ability to give a compelling account of the relevant cases from Sect. 4. Ultimately, we conclude that our view is 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 (Sect. 5.2), Leslie's cognitively based theory (Sect. 5.3), and the kind-predication view (Sect. 5.4). We won't consider pragmatic views or other contextualist-friendly views due to their similarities to Sterken's view.[56] It may well be that such views do a reasonable job at explaining the cases from Sect. 4.2, for reasons similar to Sterken's. If they do not, we think the reasons will be subtle, and involve general (and theoretically contentious) issues about the semantics/pragmatics distinction, which are beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail. Furthermore, our main reasons for preferring Sterken's view to such view lies with the overall theoretical virtues of her account, which she has argued for on independent grounds, relative to these other views.

Second, our case here with respect to the rival views is limited in another respect as well. This is that, even for the views that we do consider, we fully acknowledge that our case here is far from conclusive. Instead, our goal in what follows is to present what we take to be the strong initial case for the advantage of our overall approach relative to the competition. All of these other involve details that we don't have room to fully cover here, and which, moreover, might well be further modified in any number of ways to respond to our arguments in this paper.

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[56] For example, we omit discussion of Greenberg (2002), Nguyen (2020), and Tessler and Goodman (2019).

Third, an important precursor to the subject matter of this paper is Krifka's discussion of *definitional generics* and so we'll begin by reviewing his work and how it relates to what's at issue here (Sect. 5.1).

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?, and (iii) can the attested forms of metalinguistic negotiation we outline in Sect. 4 be smoothly targeted?

Pertinent to answering these questions is the observation that one can always challenge a term by engaging in usage that aims to change the intension or character of a term. So, in the cases at hand, a speaker might do that for the intension or character of *Gen*. Positing such usage is a readily available means to account for metalinguistic negotiation on *any* theory of generics that posits *Gen*. However, it may not be the smoothest or best way to account for whatever case is at hand. Positing such usage to explain the full cross-section of cases from Sect. 4.2—or even many or most of those cases—is unappealing for a variety of reasons. It's worth noting what these are up front.

First, recall that on Sterken's view, there are key context-sensitive aspects of the meaning of *Gen* that we think can be smoothly targeted and negotiated. We think the context-sensitive dimensions of *Gen*, as detailed on Sterken's theory, are tied to the places where metalinguistic negotiation happens most smoothly and frequently. In other words, the semantic structure put forward by Sterken lines up with the places where metalinguistic negotiation happens most smoothly and frequently. If a theory of generics doesn't posit a similar semantic structure, it owes us a story of why metalinguistic negotiation happens most naturally and most frequently in the places it does. Suppose we are right in our account (of where those places most naturally and frequently targeted) are likely to be (which we grant obviously requires further empirical work to study). Then any other theory should also provide us an account that sits well with the patterns we see with metalinguistic negotiation and generics—including patterns about where it is more or less common as well as patterns about what conversational participants experience as more or less smooth moves in a conversation. If a theorist is appealing solely to a general tool of speakers engaging in metalinguistic negotiation about changing the character of a term, we should want some sort of structure to explain the pattern we observe about which metalinguistic negotiations are happening and why. A theorist might well be able to provide such a story by appeal to things other than a term's semantics, such as, for example, by appeal to certain social features of a given context, etc. However, it's far from clear that the rival theories of generics we discuss have a good story here to tell on this front—or that one could easily be developed.

Second, it's worth keeping in mind that, as we discussed above, proposals about changing the context-invariant meaning of *Gen* made in a metalinguistic negotiation will (in many ordinary contexts) tend to have less uptake and to cause miscommunication and confusion given their departure from the current context-invariant meaning.

This will be especially true if the proposals being made are more radical and ambitious in the changes they suggest, relative to what the current meaning of *Gen* is.

Finally, one needs to consider the way that positing frequent metalinguistic negotiations over the character of *Gen* (or something else posited in a rival account of generics) interacts with the overall views of language endorsed by the theorists in question. There are, of course, views of communication that hold that— across the board—communication often involves something akin to metalinguistic negotiation over the character of terms.[57] If a theorist working on generics endorsed such a theory, she might then not be that concerned about posting frequent metalinguistic negotiation over the character of *Gen* (or, relatedly, the character of something else that plays a similar explanatory role in fixing the context-insensitive meaning of generics). But for theorists who do *not* endorse such a general theory, it's far from clear that positing frequent character-targeting metalinguistic negotiation in the case of generics is a good fit with their overall views about language or communication. Positing it might well be ad hoc, or else create tension with those overall views.

The theorists we discuss below (Leslie, Nickel, etc.) aren't ones who endorse general views about language and communication that see it as pervasively involving metalinguistic negotiation over the character of terms. Thus, we think this point has general bite with respect to the accounts they can offer of cases of metalinguistic negotiation over expressions involving generics. In contrast, the package deal we put forward here doesn't need to take a stand on how often metalinguistic negotiation over the character of terms happens in communication more generally. This is because, on the "package deal" view we are putting forward here, that kind of metalinguistic negotiation isn't playing a large role in explaining what is going on with metalinguistic negotiation over generics.

We won't belabor these three points below, about why it is unappealing to posit "revolutionary" usage tied to the context-invariant meaning of *Gen* (or something that plays a similar explanatory role in a theorist's linguistic theory) to account for the full cross-section of cases from Sect. 4.2, or even many or most of those cases. Rather, we want to point out their broad applicability to the other package deals below, and then flag them briefly below as they come up. We think that, put together, these points suggest that it is a significant issue that the rival views we consider need to posit metalinguistic negotiation targeting the character of *Gen* (or something else that fixes the character-invariant meaning of generics, on the theories in question).

5.1 Krifka on definitional generics and metalinguistic negotiation

Krifka highlights and provides an illuminating discussion of what he terms *definitional generics*, which is an important kind of metalinguistic usage of generics. Yet, as we discuss below, the phenomena we want to draw attention to are (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 allow us to appreciate why the tools we need to explain the phenomenon will

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[57] See, for example, Ludlow (2014).

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 package deal we have proposed.

Krifka is interested in understanding a particular use of generic sentences which is most prevalent with indefinite singular subjects. The puzzle is to explain a stark contrast in the availability of generic readings with bare plural versus indefinite singular subjects.[58] To illustrate, consider:

(30) a. Madrigals are polyphonic
      b. A madrigal is polyphonic.

(31) a. Madrigals are popular.
      b. # A madrigal is popular.

Given the contrast between the pairs in (30) and (31), which could also be drawn in a slew of analogous examples, it is observed that it is much more difficult to get generic readings with indefinite singular subjects than with bare plural subjects. The generic reading of indefinite singular is predominantly available when the predicated property is a *quasi-essential* property of the kind.[59] In contrast to most cases of generics, Krifka proposes that (30b) is not about madrigals, but about the way the term 'madrigal' is defined: (30b) is a *definitional generic*. It does not express a descriptive generalization about madrigals, but rather about how the term 'madrigal' is or should be used. This is a "metalinguistic" use in the sense that Plunkett and Sundell discuss, drawing from Barker.[60]

Krifka was the first to propose metalinguistic uses of generics. However, his view was spelled out with the narrower goal of accounting for the differences in distribution facts between indefinite singular and bare plural generics, rather than providing a full account of metalinguistic negotiation with generics. Krifka's focus was not the more general phenomenon under consideration here. Rather, Krifka was considering a more limited set of cases: metalinguistic uses that are limited to the subject or predicate terms of generics and not *Gen* itself.[61] Furthermore, he was not interested in how such uses could be a part of normative metalinguistic disputes about generics. This is not a criticism of Krifka, but rather a call to extend our understanding of the ubiquity and importance of metalinguistic uses of generics beyond this limited class.[62] Such an extension is a core part of what we did in Sect. 4 of this paper. Krifka does not advance

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[58] The distinction is discussed in Lawler (1973), Burton-Roberts (1977), Carlson (1995), Cohen (2001a), and Greenberg (1998), amongst others.

[59] 'Quasi-essential' in this context refers either to essential properties or to properties that are quite modally robust.

[60] Hesni (2022) 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.

[61] More specifically, Krifka suggests that the topic-comment structure of a sentence determines which expression in the sentence is defined by a definitional use of it.

[62] Our discussion of Krifka here is congenial. However, it's unclear whether Krifka would ultimately agree with our view. If metalinguistic readings of statements involving generics are as prominent as we suggest, it would rob Krifka of his main tool to distinguish bare plural and indefinite singular generics. Furthermore, his view of definitional generics is a semantic one, while our view of metalinguistic uses needn't be semantic.

a theory that is meant to cover that full extension. What we are arguing is that our package deal does so, and does so better than any of the competition.

5.2 Normality based views and metalinguistic negotiability

Recall that we briefly mentioned two normality-based views of generics in Sect. 3. The basic idea that underlies both of these views is that generics express something about what is normal for the members of a 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 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 given kind would possess under entirely normal circumstances.[63] 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.[64] 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 express a generalization over the normal members of the kind.

We'll consider briefly what both of these views predict with respect to metalinguistic negotiability and whether or not they are compatible with the observations we make in Sect. 4.1. Both views predict that the primary locus of negotiation is over the appropriate notion of normality for a given kind—namely, over what counts as normal for members of that kind. However, what this amounts to on the two views differs, since their notions of normality differ quite substantially. Here are two examples to illustrate.

First, 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 a predicated property normal for the kind at hand. (In this example, we hold fixed the idea that a historical pattern determines the "normal" circumstances, and that in those circumstances the kind members manifest the given property—i.e., the generic would be true.) Consider the following case:

NORMALITY 1:

(32) A Losing candidates publicly concede the election.
      B No, that's just something that started in 1896.

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[63] See Asher and Morreau (1995), Asher and Pelletier (2013), and Pelletier and Asher (1997).

[64] See Nickel (2016).

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

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 Sect. 2.

NORMALITY 2:

(33) A Dobermans have floppy ears.
      B 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 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 understands the explanatory strategy as that which is relevant to dog breeding and takes "Dobermans have floppy ears" to be false. Thus, A and B disagree over how to set the contextual parameter relevant to fixing what counts as normal, according to Nickel's view.

Interestingly, Nickel's notion of normality is multi-faceted and his view incorporates these facets as parameters that are set by context. His notion of normality is sensitive to three distinct parameters: *kinds, respects,* and *ways*. What it is to be a normal Doberman is different from what it is to be a normal Cockapoo. Further, there are numerous *respects* in which a member of a kind can be normal: method of extrusion of offspring, color, gender, personality, etc. Still further, there are different ways of being normal in a respect—for example, one way of being a normal Doberman with respect to ear-type is to have pointy ears and another is to have floppy ears. As such, Nickel's view predicts that there are different kinds of metalinguistic negotiation over the appropriate notion of "normality" involved in a given generic generalization, corresponding to these different contextual parameters that go into fixing a notion of "normality" in context. Thus, his view, like Sterken's contextualist view, makes specific and substantive predications about what such disputes will center on. Importantly, though, they will all still center on fixing a notion of "normality".

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, and the other cases that Nickel's view predicts, by appealing to negotiation over the lexical or contextual restrictor, and the fact that metalinguistic negotiations are relatively ubiquitous. What's less apparent is whether normality views predict enough, and the appropriate kinds,

of metalinguistic negotiation to also account for the other cases we've considered. For instance, how do normality views predict the possibility of cases like PIZZA 2 and 4, without appeal to metalinguistic usages of *Gen* that target the character of *Gen*?

One attractive and fundamental feature of normality theories is that the notion of normality can do a lot of explanatory work. It can, for example, explain (apparent) quantificational variation as a mere epiphenomenon: the proportion of members of the kind that occupy the normal worlds or that are normal will differ for different generics. This allows the normality theorist to maintain that all generics have a stable quantificational force. Pelletier, Asher, and Morreau treat generics as universal generalizations—put roughly, an utterance of the generic 'Ks are F' expresses that all Ks, in the most K-normal worlds, are F. According to Nickel, generics are existentially and universally quantified—very roughly, an utterance of the generic 'Ks are F' expresses that there exists a way of being a normal K such that all Ks that are normal in that way are F).

There are two main reasons why having a stable quantificational force is thought to be important. First, generics often sound as though they are universals or something close to that. Second, treating generics as universals, or as having stable quantificational force, helps explain the aptness of (defeasible) inference patterns in which they figure. As an example, consider this instance of defeasible modus ponens (DMP):

(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 bird.
          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 the meaning of Gen. Thus, any concessions here, in terms of weakening or making the quantificational component of Gen context-sensitive, come at a cost in terms of independent motivation for the view itself. But such a concession 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.

Pelletier, Asher, and Morreau motivate their view, in large part, in terms of defeasible inference patterns. Nickel is not as concerned with defeasible inference patterns as

with the result that there is in fact a deductively valid inference pattern involving generics—what he calls *kind-percolation*.[65] An instance of this kind of inference is:

(KIND-PERCOLATION) Ravens have wings.
                    Ravens are a sub-kind of birds. (i.e., every raven is a bird.)
                    Therefore, birds have wings.

Nickel's view validates KIND-PERCOLATION: Very roughly, the premise 'Ravens have wings' says that there is a way of being "normal" such that all ravens that are normal in that way have wings. The second premise says that ravens are a sub-kind of bird so that every raven is a bird and the relevant ways of being normal are suitably related. Thus, there is a way of being "normal" such that all birds that are normal in that way have wings—in other words, birds have wings. The stability of the quantifiers and ways of being "normal" matter to the validity of KIND-PERCOLATION. Thus, whether one is concerned with defeasible patterns or patterns like KIND-PERCOLATION, the important point remains: a primary feature for normality theories is that quantificational variability can be treated as an epiphenomen, and that to validate these inference patterns, keeping the quantificational force of generics stable is crucial. Thus, normality theories are not in a good position to explain cases like PIZZA 2 in terms of metalinguistic negotiation over their variable quantificational force.

It should be noted that Nickel has some additional resources to account for cases like PIZZA 2, which are worth further exploring. Though he argues that generics are stably existentially quantified with an embedded universal quantifier, he also argues that generics conversationally implicate a universally quantified claim. An utterance of 'Ravens have wings', for example, conversationally implicates the universally quantified 'all normal ravens have wings', based on the background assumption that there is only one way of being a normal raven. Nickel might explain disputes like PIZZA 2 (and our socially charged example (26)–(27)) as disputes over the pragmatically conveyed content. Though this is one way to go, Sterken and Liebesman have both argued against the empirical plausibility of this aspect of Nickel's theory.[66] Furthermore, Nickel's view still has difficulty with cases like PIZZA 4 where he would need to claim that all disputes over the lexical restrictor are disputes over 'normality'—that is, over the character of 'normal' (understood in terms of Nickel's particular multifaceted, causal explanatory account).

Of course, another tactic here would be to claim that cases like PIZZA 2 are metalinguistic negotiations that target the character of *Gen*. (Likewise any metalinguistic 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 such usage). However, this approach is implausible for the reasons already rehearsed above. In short, it might be that there are some usages of generics that target the character of *Gen*, but positing that happening frequently (as imagined here) is not an attractive option, for the general reasons we discussed at the start of this section.

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[65] See Nickel (2016, pp. 70 and 203).

[66] See Sterken (2016b) and Liebesman (2017).

5.3 Leslie's view and metalinguistic negotiability

A different view of the meaning of generics is taken by Leslie who sees them as connected to our cognition of generalization.[67] According to Leslie, the mind is equipped with an *innate primitive cognitive mechanism of generalization* and generics "give voice" to this mechanism—that is, the meaning of generics encodes qualitative features of the ways in which this mechanism generalizes. This view explains the non-systematicity of generic content (some of which we saw in Sect. 2) by appealing 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 with content that is seemingly dependent on features like the strikingness of the predicated property, as in (34) below; or whether or not there are any "positive" counter-instances, as in (35) below:

(34)   Sharks attack bathers.
(35)   Peacocks have fabulous blue tails.

(34) seems true even though less than 1% of sharks in fact attack any bathers, and (35) 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: (i) 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 (34), (ii) 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 the following way. We accept (35) 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 allows for.[68] Consider the following examples involving (34) and (35):

STRIKING:

(36)   A   Sharks attack bathers.
       B   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.

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[67] Leslie (2007) and Leslie (2008).

[68] Given Leslie's disquotational semantics, her view may not lend itself well to describing these as metalinguistic negotiations. Her view might be better suited to describing these as disagreements about whether one of the disjuncts of her metaphysical truth-conditions obtains—i.e., about whether a certain truth-maker obtains. However, Leslie's disquotational view might be repaired in various ways (cf. Sterken (2015b)) to accommodate metalinguistic uses. Alternatively, of course, she might appeal to other non-semantic mechanisms.

Here, supposing that both A and B agree that only a very small proportion of sharks in fact attack 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 there are any positive alternative properties to that being predicated in statement (35):

POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE:

(37)   A   Peacocks have fabulous blue tails.
      B   But some peacocks have fabulous yellow tails, too.

Though Leslie's view provides a compelling explanation for these kinds of negotiations, it is far from clear that her view in fact combines well into a package deal that can 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 generalizations. 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".[69]

Of course, not all cases where speakers engage in metalinguistic negotiation need be ones where the speakers have, or even think they have, any serious control over the meaning of words, or are even putting forward 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 needs to 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 over the meaning of generics in particular, much more so than other kinds of expressions. We don't think this kind of radical asymmetry that her theory posits is reflected in the intelligibility of a range of cases of metalinguistic negotiation involving generics.

Her view also doesn't explain the full cross-section of cases outlined in Sect. 4.1. Cases like PIZZA 2 and PIZZA 4, both in terms of the aims of the speakers and the outcomes of the dialogues, seem quite clearly and directly tied to elements like the quantificational and modal force of generics, which are both aspects of generic content that her view rejects. Of course, Leslie could appeal to metalinguistic usage that targets the character of *Gen* (or the character of something else that plays a similar explanatory role in one's theory of generics). However, again, this is unappealing for the reasons stated above.

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[69] Having said this, there is the possibility that speakers are not even aware of what generics give voice to, and do 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 sixty 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, 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.

Leslie might also argue that cases like PIZZA 2 and 4 are first-order disputes spawned by the need to respond to and correct for errors caused by the quirks and biases of our primitive cognitive mechanism of generalization (which generics give voice to). If generics give voice to the quirks and biases of our primitive cognitive mechanism of generalization, then sometimes it will become apparent to speakers that a generic utterance will fail to track the world appropriately, which would generate an increased need to respond to and correct the first-order claim. Cases like PIZZA 2 and 4 would then be canonical disputes and not metalinguistic negotiations. In addition, Leslie (and other views) might appeal to other cognitive biases connected to our use of generics. For example, Leslie, Khemlani, and Glucksberg found that upon hearing a generic, speakers will subsequently overgeneralize and endorse the corresponding universal statement. To illustrate: upon hearing "ducks lay eggs", subjects have a tendency to subsequently endorse "all ducks lay eggs". Leslie, Khemlani, and Glucksberg call this the *Generic Overgeneralization Effect (GOG)*.[70] In the case of PIZZA 2, then, Leslie might appeal to the GOG effect. Effectively, when the speaker responds to "Norwegian like pizza" as in (21), the GOG effect is causing her to misinterpret the generic utterance and correct the original speaker based on that misinterpretation. The GOG effect, then, could be understood as explaining why speakers frequently respond to utterances of generics with corresponding "not all" claims. We think this is a potentially promising line to explore on behalf of Leslie. But we are skeptical it can be made to work. In short, this is because it would not go far enough to explain the kinds of follow ups in conversation that may ensue, and the full range of quantificational negotiations that are plausibly possible and commonplace. Such a view of these cases also fails to appropriately and informatively draw a line between the cognitive mechanisms legitimately responsible for fixing the semantic value of *Gen*, and those that cause us to misinterpret others' utterances. We do not think that proponents of such a view can have it both ways. Thus, although there is surely more to be explored here on behalf of this potential line on behalf of Leslie, we think there is strong reason to doubt it will be fully successful on its own, given the explanatory tasks at hand.

Leslie may have other tools in her toolkit to use as well. In other work, she discusses a class of cases she calls *normative generics*.[71] An example of a normative generic is:

(38)   Boys don't cry.

The normative generic (38) 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 which gender cries more. This interpretation of (38) 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.[72]

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[70] Leslie et al. (2011).

[71] See Leslie (2015).

[72] See Knobe and Prasada (2011). See also Knobe et al. (2013). On Knobe and Prasada's account, "dual character" concepts characterize their members in terms of both descriptive features and normative ideals.

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, say a speaker utters (38) 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 accommodate 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.[73]

It is also worth noting that generics can express a wide variety of normative generalizations, tied to different kinds of norms, ranging from legal rules to moral norms to social norms. Thus, we should expect disputes to arise not just about whether a normative or descriptive generalization is apt, but also about which particular *kind* of normative generalization offers the best interpretation of the generic at issue. Consider the following example:

(39)   A   Animals are food.
       B   No, that's just socially sanctioned convention.

Imagine the dialogue in (39) taking place in a context where all of the pertinent non-linguistic conditions are understood to be settled. This includes any normative conditions relevant to evaluating the generalization. Suppose, for instance, that it's mutually known to A and B that meat-eating is an operative social convention and that both are meat-eaters and think that eating meat is morally permissible. Thus, the disagreement is not about how many or which animals are food, whether there is anything modally or qualitatively special about animals being food, or whether or not eating meat is morally right or wrong, or socially important. Rather, what the disagreement in (39) hinges on is which form of normativity ought to apply given the context. A and B might, for instance, be discussing whether A's generalization is apt for explaining why people eat meat.

Leslie's account does not adequately explain such disputes, where what's at issue is the normativity involved in the generalization itself. Thus, though Leslie does offer some scope for certain normative disagreements, as she contends that we can disagree about which ideals a given kind should be subject to, this contention doesn't have

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enough scope to account for the amount of normative negotiation we propose is available.[74] 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 (as the example above also illustrates).

5.4 Kind-predication and metalinguistic negotiability

A prominent, but nonetheless controversial, proposal is that generics are a species of monadic kind-predication.[75] On this view, generics do not express dyadic generalizations—quantificational or otherwise—but rather ascribe a property to a kind. On such analyses, the subject-term is taken to be a referring expression (e.g., a name or a definite description) that denotes a kind.[76]

Liebesman advocates the *simple kind theory*.[77] According to this theory, the semantics of generics is "simple", in that generics straightforwardly ascribe properties to kinds. The simple kind theory doesn't attempt to account for any of the variability noted in examples (1)–(6). Rather, variability is part and parcel of a metaphysical theory of genericity: a theory of how and when kinds inherit properties from their 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, he predicts that speakers might only negotiate over the kind-term, the predicate-term, or other posited bits of the logical form of the generic sentence (e.g., a covert distributive operative), not over the appropriate content for *Gen*. As a result, his theory doesn't explain the cases outlined in Sect. 4.1 as negotiations over the content of a generalization. Given this and all the extra posits needed, it is quite unclear whether his view combines well with a theory of metalinguistic negotiation into an attractive package deal that would give an adequate account of the cases as metalinguistic negotiations.

However, a proponent of Liebesman's view has salient options here for pushing back that such an account is needed in the first place. One key option is to claim that the cases we put forward in Sect. 4.1 are really canonical disputes that concern "first-order" metaphysical issues, such as whether the kinds really have the properties being

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[74] 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, p. 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 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 statement, even though the two are in agreement about the primary role of philosophers.

[75] See Liebesman (2011), Carlson (1977), and Teichman (2016).

[76] 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.

[77] See Liebesman (2011).

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, two substantive points. It seems to us that pursuing this strategy across the board will lead to a forced reading of the range of cases in Sect. 4.1. It might also involve questionable metaphysical posits about kinds and essences that they (purportedly) have. 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 are on the right track. So, what we want to say here is this: *if* Plunkett and Sundell are on track, that gives us good reason to think that similar metalinguistic analyses are also on track in our cases involving generics too. They would be so for many of the same reasons they are on track in Plunkett and Sundell's cases (including the kind of linguistic data presented, best overall fit with independently theoretically appealing views in metasemantics and semantics, etc.).[78]

5.5 A Comparative disadvantage for our view?

In this section, we've considered our view relative to what we take to be some of its most prominent rivals. We've argued that our view is in a stronger position to explain key aspects of metalinguistic negotiation involving generics, and that this is a significant mark in its favor. In closing our comparison, we want to briefly pause to introduce, and then respond to, a potential worry for our view. The worry is that our view does a worse job than some in accounting for certain cases involving metalinguistic negotiation, other than the ones we have focused on.

To see the potential challenge for our view consider that, in this section, we have been focused on the kinds of cases we introduced in Sect. 4.1, where metalinguistic negotiation appears to go relatively "smoothly" in conversation. They go "smoothly" in the sense that the kinds of linguistic moves being made don't lead to deep confusion, conversational breakdown, or the like, even if the speakers involved in a conversation don't resolve the disagreements expressed in it. Sterken's theory, we've argued, is in a strong position to explain why the cases we've focused on go "smoothly" in this way, and also why they appear to be relatively frequent. In short, as we have discussed, the semantic structure put forward by Sterken's theory posits flexibility in places that line up with the aspects of generics that are the site of metalinguistic negotiation in these cases, thereby providing the foundation for a compelling explanation. However, there are, of course, cases where engagement in metalinguistic negotiation seems (at least prima facie) to be much less smooth—for example, where the conversation quickly stalls out, or speakers are deeply confused. One might well think this happens in certain cases where a speaker puts forward a "revolutionary" view of the meaning of a generic.

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[78] 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 kinds of evidence at play in each case.

If that is right, it might seem like a problem for our view. For if we've explained the "smooth" cases with emphasis on semantic flexibility, then (at least prima facie) it seems it would make sense that these other, "non-smooth" cases should be explained in reverse, with appeal to semantic *in*flexibility. If so, that's an issue for us, given that Sterken's view of generics involves massive amounts of semantic flexibility, relative to competing context-invariant or "less contextualist" views of generics, where the meaning of *Gen* is comparatively more established, or where the meaning of generics is comparatively less contextualist in some other way.

We think this challenge identifies something important—namely, that it counts in favor of a view when it has resources not only to predict and explain cases where negotiation seems to happen more smoothly, but also those where it does not. Moreover, we agree that one good start to explaining (at least some of) the latter cases might well be to posit certain kinds of semantic inflexibility—and that this route is one that key rival views we've discussed can more readily appeal to than we can. However, this isn't the only promising route to explore for providing a compelling explanation here of the relevant cases.

With that in mind, now suppose we grant that there are cases where very "revolutionary" usages are resisted as unintelligible or "off the wall" in some way by listeners, and that their coming across as *too* "revolutionary" is part of what makes things not go "smoothly". Now recall the point we made in Sect. 4.2 (drawing on previous discussion in Sect. 3) that some metalinguistic negotiations about 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. After all, as we discussed, in a given context, the conventional norms around how to fill out one or more of the various context-sensitive parameters involved in a context-sensitive term might be relatively well-established or even calcified. If that is right, then even if a speaker isn't targeting the context-invariant meaning of *Gen*, certain uses of generics might well come across as seriously "revolutionary" to a listener. If coming across as "revolutionary" in that way is part of what explains the case not going "smoothly", then we have the basis for a story for why those usages come across that way, without positing semantic inflexibility of *Gen* as the core reason why they do.

In a related vein, consider that, in general, contextualist accounts of a given term can account for cases of stability in meaning of that term across contexts by means other than by appeal to (purported) context-insensitive facts about its semantics. In short, these accounts can appeal to relatively stable conventionalised norms for use of that term across a specific range of contexts, or other factors that (according to the theory) would cause a context-sensitive term to output a stable meaning across a specific range of contexts. With that in mind, it might well be that certain generics—e.g., "mammals give birth to live young"—may express the same generalization across a wide range or even all contexts, despite the fact that *Gen* is highly context-sensitive.

Given the possibility of such relatively stable meanings for some generics (across a range of contexts) and the possibility of "revolutionary" uses not tied to targeting the context-invariant meaning of *Gen*, we think there is scope for Sterken's view to explain a number of the cases where negotiation does not go smoothly. It would, of course, take us well beyond the scope of this paper to develop this explanation in full,

and to see how the resulting picture fares, relative to the competition, when applied to the data we see about when cases of metalinguistic negotiation do not go smoothly. So we don't take ourselves to have given anything like a conclusive case. But we think that our preliminary case here is enough to suggest we have a promising route for explaining the kinds of cases this objection brings up, and that it is far from clear that our "package deal" view does worse with respect to the relevant cases than our competition.

Finally, it is worth recalling here that, at the end of the day, what matters here is overall explanatory power across all the relevant cases, including those that go smoothly. If what we have argued earlier in this paper is right, then other views of generics that posit less context-sensitivity (or posit it in different places), have a much tougher time at explaining the full range of cases we discussed in Sect. 4.2 than our view does. Thus, even if there turned out be *some* relative advantage these other views had in explaining *certain* cases that our view does not, it might well be that their relative disadvantages here with other cases from Sect. 4.2 outweigh their (purported) benefits with respect to the "not smooth" cases. In short, whatever (purported) benefits one gets for explaining "problem" cases by appeal to something (e.g., semantic inflexibility of *Gen*) needs to be weighed against the costs of introducing that thing for the *other* cases that we've been focused on in this paper. We think that our "package deal" is going to do the best overall job, relative to the competition, for accounting for the full range of cases considered as a whole—and have tried to give a strong initial argument on behalf of this claim. Whether that turns out to be true will of course depend on further investigation.

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 account for these metalinguistic negotiations about generics, relative to other leading contemporary views of generics.[79] We've thus argued 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. Based on our arguments in this paper, we think this is the best view of generics on offer. In future work, we aim to 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. For example, we envision engaging in further discussion about those disputes that Leslie understands as ones involving "normative generics".

We want to close this paper with two points.

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[79] See Sterken (2015a, 2016a).

First, regardless of the success of this particular package deal view of generics that we defend, there is a more basic lesson of this paper: namely, that paying closer attention to the prevalence and dynamics of (of at least apparent cases of) metalinguistic negotiation within discourse involving generics can lead to important avenues 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.

Second, there might be important upshots of this paper that don't concern generics in particular. In this paper, we've argued that expressions involving generics might well be both particularly important and frequent sites for metalinguistic negotiation. We argued that this is partly because of important cognitive, epistemological, and social roles generics play, in combination with the high degree of context-sensitivity they exhibit. But that certainly does *not* mean that metalinguistic negotiation doesn't happen with other expressions (whether those involving explicit quantifiers, plurals, gradable adjectives, etc.), or that metalinguistic negotiations about those other expressions don't pattern in similar ways to those we see with generics. For example, given the close connections between plurals and generics (especially on some theories), we would expect there to be some similar patterns here between the kinds of metalinguistic negotiation we see with one expression and those we see with the other. Thus, even though our work in this paper has focused on generics in particular, we think it has the potential to contribute to our understanding of a range of further expressions as well.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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