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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Boys Don't Cry' – An Ambiguous Statement?

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Abstract: As has often been observed in the literature, an utterance of a generic such as 'Boys don't cry' can convey a normative behavioural rule that applies to boys, roughly: that boys shouldn't cry. This observation has led many authors to the claim that generics are ambiguous: they allow both for a descriptive as well as a normative reading. The present paper argues against this common assumption: it argues that the observation in question should be addressed at the level of pragmatics, rather than at the level of semantics. In particular, the paper argues that the normative force of utterances of generics results from the presence of a conversational implicature. This result should somewhat alleviate the task of finding a proper semantic analysis of generics since it shows that at least one of their intriguing features need not be reflected in their truth-conditions.

Keywords: Generics; normative generics; semantics-pragmatics interface; conversational implicatures.

1. Introduction

Generics are statements such as 'Tigers have stripes', 'Birds eat worms', or 'Houses have doors'. In a first approximation, we can say that they are

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statements that express *generalisations*, in the present examples, generalisations about tigers, birds, or houses.[1] But it is far from trivial to say something more precise about generics, in particular to give a precise statement of their truth-conditions. A natural thought appears to be that generics function similarly to quantified statements such as 'All tigers have stripes', 'Most tigers have stripes', or 'Some tigers have stripes'. That is, it appears natural to assume that a *certain amount* of the members of the pertinent kind need to have the property in question for a generic to be true. But it is unclear what that amount could be. Some generics appear to require the majority of the members of the pertinent kind to have the property in question. For instance, the truth of the generics 'Tigers have stripes' and 'Birds eat worms' appears to require most tigers to be striped and most birds to eat worms respectively. But others do not. For instance, the generic 'Ducks lay eggs' is true even though only the mature female ducks lay eggs. This makes it questionable whether a semantic analysis of generics can be given in terms of a quantified determiner.[2]

A further complication in spelling out the truth-conditions of generics results from the observation that some generics seem to allow for descriptive as well as normative readings. A paradigm example is the generic 'Boys don't cry'. As has often been observed in the literature, this generic can convey a descriptive generalisation about boys. But it can also convey a normative behavioural rule that applies to boys, roughly: that boys *shouldn't* cry. This observation has led many authors to the claim that generics are ambiguous. Some claim that their ambiguity results from the fact that they can exhibit different logical forms, while others have argued that generics are not *per se* ambiguous. According to them, rather nouns such as 'boys' are ambiguous and, thus, generics that contain such nouns are only *derivatively* ambiguous. Both accounts, however, share the assumption that the observation in question needs to be addressed at the level of *semantics* and, thus, should be reflected in the truth-conditions of generics.

[1] The examples are all bare plural generics. Generics can also contain a definite or indefinite description instead of a bare plural (e.g., 'The tiger has stripes' or 'A tiger has stripes').

[2] Cp. Leslie and Lerner (2016), amongst many others.

The present paper will argue against this common assumption: it will argue that the observation in question—that generics appear to allow for descriptive as well as normative readings—should be addressed at the level of *pragmatics* rather than at the level of semantics. In particular, the paper will argue that the normative force of utterances of generics does not result from ambiguity of one of the uttered expressions—neither of the generic itself nor of an expression contained in the generic. Rather, it arises due to the presence of a *conversational implicature*. If correct, the result of the paper should somewhat alleviate the task of finding a proper semantic analysis of generics, since it shows that at least one of the intriguing features of generics need not be reflected in their truth-conditions.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2 I will present further examples to motivate the claim that generics allow for descriptive as well as normative readings. In section 3 I will present two semantic explanations that have been proposed in the literature and argue that they both cannot fully capture the extent of the phenomenon in question. In section 4 I will propose a pragmatic alternative and argue that it is superior to the semantic explanations.

2. Descriptive and normative reading

Generics are usually used to express generalisations. For instance, ‘Tigers have stripes’ expresses a generalisation about tigers and ‘Birds eat worms’ expresses a generalisation about birds. However, as already indicated, not all utterances of generics seem to express a descriptive generalisation. Some utterances of generics have ‘a certain kind of normative force’ (Leslie 2015, 112). Consider, for instance, the following quote from the TV show *Breaking Bad*, in which Gus Fring, a drug dealer, tries to convince Walter White, who is in urgent need of money, to continue selling drugs for him:

> And a man, a man provides. And he does it even when he’s not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he’s a man.

In this quote Gus Fring uses the generic ‘A man provides’. But he does not use it to make a descriptive generalisation about what a man in general does.

Rather, his utterance has normative force: it is supposed to convey that the addressee has the obligation to provide for his family.

There are many more similar examples. For instance, utterances of generics such as 'Boys don't cry', 'Women put family before career', 'Women don't wear pants', 'Men open doors for ladies', 'Children at our day care don't hit each other', or 'Friends don't let friends drive drunk' are usually not used to express generalisations about boys, women, men, children, or friends. This becomes particularly obvious from the fact that one may sincerely utter the generics even though one does not have any opinion about the actual distribution of the property in question among boys, women, men, children, or friends respectively—or even if one thinks that boys do cry, women do not put family before career, or friends do let friends drive drunk. As Leslie puts it, the generic 'Friends don't let friends drive drunk' is not 'a banal descriptive observation; utterances of it rather serve as *injunctions* precisely because friends … all too often let their friends drive drunk …' (Leslie 2015, 134). Similarly, the generics 'Women don't wear pants' or 'Children at our day care don't hit each other' might be uttered in situations in which the speaker thinks that women do wear pants or that children at the day care do hit each other to point out that this behaviour is in conflict with a norm he takes to be in place.

While this phenomenon has been noted by many authors, there are only a few authors that have tried to provide an explanation for it.[3] According to the explanations that have been proposed so far, generics are in some way ambiguous. This claim gives rise to the question of what the pertinent readings of generics consist in and what exactly induces their ambiguity. In the following I will discuss two accounts that answer these questions, the first given by Sarah-Jane Leslie and the second given by Ariel Cohen.

[3] Cp., e.g., Burton-Roberts (1977), Carlson (1995), Cohen (2001), Greenberg (2003), McConnell-Ginet (2012), Krifka (2013), and Leslie (2015). While Leslie (2015) is interested in the question what induces the normative force of a generic like 'Boys don't cry', the other authors are primarily concerned with a puzzle about the distribution of indefinite singular and bare plural generics. However, some of the proposed solutions (in particular Cohen 2001, Greenberg 2003, and Krifka 2012) can be extended to answer the question at hand and are thus discussed in the following as well.

3. Semantic explanations

Both Leslie’s and Cohen’s accounts rely on the assumption that generics are ambiguous but they differ in how they explain their ambiguity. While Leslie has argued that their ambiguity results from the nouns they contain, Cohen has claimed that it rather results from the logical structure of generics themselves. In the following I will critically discuss both accounts, starting with Leslie’s.

3.1 Social role nouns

Following work by Knobe et al. (2013), Leslie (2015) has argued that nouns such as ‘boys’, ‘women’, ‘men’—in general: nouns that denote groups of people for which certain social norms are in place (in the following: *social role nouns*)—are ambiguous. For instance, the noun ‘boys’ can either be used (roughly) in the sense of ‘premature human beings that have the biological characteristics of males’ or (roughly) in the sense of ‘human beings who fulfil the ideals of boyhood’. Accordingly, a generic such as ‘Boys don’t cry’ can be used in two senses as well: it can either be used in the sense of ‘Premature human beings that have the biological characteristics of males don’t cry’ or in the sense of ‘Human beings that fulfil the ideals of boyhood don’t cry’ (or shortly ‘Ideal boys don’t cry’).

There are two difficulties with Leslie’s account. Firstly, it is questionable whether the claim that social role nouns are ambiguous is sufficient in order to explain the normative force that generic utterances can have. According to Leslie, a normative utterance of ‘Boys don’t cry’ expresses the content that ideal boys don’t cry. Clearly, an utterance with this content *can* have normative force, e.g. in a context in which it is part of the common ground that the addressee wants to be an ideal boy. In such a context, the addressee can simply infer that he should not cry in order to count as an ideal boy. However, an utterance of ‘Boys don’t cry’ can have normative force even in a context in which this proposition is not part of the common ground, e.g. in a context in which it is commonly assumed that the addressee does not want to be a boy, let alone be an ideal boy. In such a context it is unclear how conveying a generalisation about ideal boys can serve as an injunction

that has normative force. Hence, as it stands, Leslie's account cannot fully accommodate the phenomenon in question.[4]

Secondly, Leslie's account predicts that only generics that contain social role nouns can be used in two different ways. But that prediction is not borne out. This can already be seen from some of the examples that Cohen (2001, 194) presents. Among others, he cites the generic 'Bishops move diagonally'. As Cohen points out, this generic gives rise to the same phenomenon as generics like 'Boys don't cry'. But the noun 'bishops' is not a social role noun: it does not denote a group of people for which certain social norms apply. Accordingly, the pertinent normative reading cannot be due to the fact that the generic contains an ambiguous social role noun. Further examples that illustrate the same point are easy to find. Suppose, for instance, a young interior designer proposes a sparse and clean interior for a new house and his superior rejects his proposal with the words 'Family homes are warm and cosy'. Surely, the point of the superior's statement is not to inform her employee about how family homes are generally designed—she may not even believe that in general family homes are warm and cosy. Rather, she informs her employee how he *should* make family homes look like. But, again, 'family home' is not a social role noun and, thus, the normative force of the utterance cannot be due to the fact that it contains an ambiguous social role noun.

In order to deal with this difficulty, Leslie might extend her account to nouns like 'bishops' or 'family homes', i.e. she might claim that such nouns are ambiguous as well. But, firstly, this would require her to postulate even more widespread ambiguities since presumably *any* generic can receive a normative reading in appropriate circumstances. Secondly, extending her account in this way would still not allow her to account for the extent of the phenomenon. Take, for instance, the quantified sentence 'None of the other boys is crying.' In uttering this sentence one can simply describe what the other boys are doing. But one can also call on someone to behave in

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[4] Leslie could appeal to further linguistic mechanisms. For instance, she could argue that in such a context the normative force of the utterance is due to a Gricean implicature. But the following discussion will make clear (i) that Leslie would object to such an extension of her account and (ii) that there is a more parsimonious account available.

a certain way: if a mother says to her crying son 'None of the other boys is crying', then she conveys that her son *should* behave like the other boys do.[5] But in this case the normative force of the utterance cannot be due to the fact that the mother uses 'boys' in the sense of 'ideal boys' since she does not express that the other ideal boys don't cry. Leslie might try to argue that the linguistic mechanism that is at work in this case differs from the one that is pertinent in the case of generics. But it is not clear that this challenge can be met: in both cases we have a sentence that can either be used to describe something or that can serve as an injunction with normative force—and in both cases the normative force cannot be due to the fact that the sentence contains any obviously normative vocabulary. Without any further indication, it is thus not clear why the cases should be kept apart.

To sum up, Leslie's account is insufficient since (i) it cannot fully explain the normative force that generic utterances can have and (ii) it fails to account for the extent of the phenomenon: generics that do not contain social role nouns allow for normative as well as descriptive readings as well. Of course, it still seems to be the case that generics that contain social role nouns are especially susceptible for allowing a descriptive as well as a normative reading. A complete account of the phenomenon should accommodate this observation. In due course, I will try to provide such an account.

3.2 Divergent logical forms

According to Cohen (2001), generics themselves are ambiguous: they can have different logical forms. For instance, the generic 'Boys don't cry' can express a generalisation and, thus, have (roughly) the following logical form:[6]

$$Gen\ x\ [Boys\ (x)][Do\ not\ cry\ (x)]$$

In this case the operator 'Gen' functions as a generic operator for which Cohen proposes a quantificational analysis. However, the generic 'Boys don't cry' can also have (roughly) the following logical form:

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[5] Sterken (2014, 162) also notes that quantificational sentences can have a 'rules-and-regulations' reading as well.

[6] I follow here Leslie's simplified presentation of Cohen's account (cp. Leslie 2015, 119).

$$in - effect(!\,(Boys\ (x) \Rightarrow\ Do\ not\ cry\ (x)))$$

In this case the generic 'Boys don't cry' ascribes to a certain rule the property of being in effect, namely to the rule that boys don't cry. Since a generic like 'Boys don't cry' can have either of these two logical forms, it can be used to express a generalisation or it can be used to express that a certain rule is in effect. Or so Cohen claims.

In contrast to Leslie's account, Cohen's account has the advantage that it can deal with generics like 'Bishops move diagonally', which do not contain a social role noun. According to his account, *any* generic can either be used to express a generalisation or to express that a certain rule is in effect. And, yet, it appears that his account is confronted with a similar difficulty as Leslie's account: it cannot capture the extent of the phenomenon in question. For there appear to be *non-generic* statements that can be used either descriptively or with 'a certain kind of normative force' (Leslie 2015, 112). As already pointed out, this holds for quantified statements like 'None of the other boys is crying'. The same observation can be made with respect to singular statements: suppose, for instance, it is a general rule in a farmer's family that the first-born son takes over the farm when he is old enough. Let us further suppose that the first-born son would prefer to leave the countryside and his sister, who endorses his plan, tries to put in a good word for him. But when she tries to convince her parents, her father only replies: 'He takes care of the farm'. In this case, the father conveys his opinion about what the son is supposed to do—and he does so by uttering a sentence that is usually used to *describe* what someone does. Hence, non-generic statements give rise to exactly the same phenomenon: they can be used to describe something but they can also serve as an injunction even though they do not contain any obviously normative vocabulary.

Thus, both Leslie and Cohen overlook that the phenomenon in question can arise for almost any kind of statement. However, this observation suggests that a pragmatic explanation is preferable to a semantic one that ties it to some special kind of words or construction. In the following section I will propose such a pragmatic explanation and defend it against objections.[7]

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[7] Krifka (2012) has proposed a semantic explanation as well. According to Krifka, the normative force of some utterances of generics is due to the fact that generics

4. A pragmatic explanation

As a general methodological rule, Grice (1989, 47) has recommended not to multiply meanings beyond necessity. Following his advice, we should investigate whether we can give a pragmatic explanation of the phenomenon in question. According to such an explanation, utterances of generics such as 'Boys don't cry' express a generalisation about boys and in some contexts they additionally conversationally implicate that in a certain respect (crying) the addressee *should* behave like boys in general do. This explanation is admittedly quite simple but it has the following advantages in contrast to Leslie's and (partly) Cohen's explanations:

(1) *Normative force* A pragmatic explanation does not have any trouble to explain that an utterance of 'Boys don't cry' can have normative force even in utterance contexts in which it is part of the common ground that the addressee does not want to be a boy, let alone be an ideal boy. For, according to this explanation, the speaker implicates that the addressee should behave like boys in general do—and that implicature can have normative force even if the addressee does not want to be a boy.

(2) *Parsimony* A pragmatic explanation does not postulate additional meanings and, thus, keeps the lexicon simple.

(3) *Generality* According to a pragmatic explanation, the phenomenon in question results from features of utterance contexts and, thus, it can account for the fact that it is not restricted to a *certain kind of expression* (social role nouns) or to a *certain kind of construction* (generics).

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allow for a definitional reading: e.g. a normative utterance of 'Boys don't cry' expresses that the concept *boys* is defined such that only non-crying things fall under that concept (or at least that it should be defined in such a way; cp. Greenberg (2003) for a similar account). But again: (i) this claim alone is not sufficient to explain the normative force of such utterances since there are contexts in which mere information about the definition of *boys* is not suitable to direct the addresses' actions; (ii) this claim does not appear to be able to capture all normative uses of generics. For instance, a speaker's utterance of 'A tiger lives outdoors' can have normative force but in making that utterance the speaker certainly does not want to claim that living outdoors is part of the definition of the concept *tiger*.

> And yet it allows us to explain why the phenomenon occurs more often with generics that contain social role nouns rather than with other kinds of expressions. Firstly, it occurs more often with generics (rather than with singular statements such as 'He works at the farm') since generics say something about groups of people (or things) and norms and rules are usually formulated for *groups* of people (or things), rather than for singular entities. And, secondly, it occurs more often with generics that contain social role nouns rather than with generics that do not ('Family homes are warm and cosy') since most norms and rules that are in place apply to *social* groups, rather than to groups of things like homes or animals.

Thus, *prima facie* it appears that a pragmatic explanation is superior to extant alternatives. However, Leslie (2015) has provided two objections against a pragmatic explanation. In the following I will discuss her objections as well as a further worry a pragmatic explanation might give rise to.

4.1 How the implicature is triggered

It is generally assumed that if something is a conversational implicature, its presence has to be explicable by appeal to conversational maxims. However, according to Leslie, this requirement is not fulfilled:

> Consider, for example, a standard utterance of 'friends don't let friends drive drunk'. For the pragmatic account to explain its normative force, we would have to suppose that [it] is so obviously false as a descriptive statement that the speaker could not have possibly meant to assert that—or alternatively so obviously true that it triggers a search for a more informative content. Neither characterization seems remotely plausible. (Leslie 2015, 137)

Leslie argues that neither the maxim of quality nor the maxim of quantity can explain the presence of an implicature. While this appears to be correct, there is a further maxim—the maxim of relation ('Be relevant')—that is perfectly well able to explain the presence of a conversational implicature. Suppose, for instance, a mother says to her crying son 'Boys don't cry'. If in making this utterance the mother were only conveying a descriptive generalisation about what boys in general do, her utterance would be

irrelevant in the utterance context. Accordingly, the boy will try to interpret her statement in a way such that it is relevant and thereby arguably come to the conclusion that she wants to convey that in a certain respect (crying) he should behave like boys in general do. Thus, the presence of the implicature *can* be explicated by appeal to one of the conversational maxims, it is simply a different maxim than the ones Leslie considers.

4.2 Empirical counter evidence?

Leslie's second argument relies on the assumption that children are able to grasp the normative force that an utterance of 'Boys don't cry' may have. However, so she proceeds, children are not able to understand conversational implicatures. Thus, she concludes, the normative force that such an utterance may have cannot be due to the presence of an implicature.

Leslie cites an experiment due to Noveck (2001) to justify the premise that children are not able to understand conversational implicatures. In this experiment 60 children and 25 adults were asked to either accept or reject statements containing the determiner 'some'. Some of the statements were false ('Some stores are made of bubbles'), some true ('Some birds live in cages'), and some true but infelicitous ('Some giraffes have long necks'). As you can see in the table, in contrast to the adults, most children accepted the statement 'Some giraffes have long necks' even though it conflicts with the maxim of quantity ('Be informative').[8] Based on this experiment, Leslie claims that there is strong empirical evidence that children do not understand conversational implicatures.

Statements	Evaluation	8 years	10 years	Adults
False ('Some stores are made of bubbles')	reject	95%	99%	98%
True and felicitous ('Some birds live in cages')	accept	84%	90%	99%
True but infelicitous ('Some giraffes have long necks')	accept	89%	85%	41%

[8] This utterance conflicts with the maxim of quantity since a more informative statement could have been made: 'All (or at least most) giraffes have long necks'.

However, it is doubtful whether Noveck's experiment indeed provides support for Leslie's premise. Firstly, if at all, it could only show that children are not able to understand scalar implicatures, i.e. implicatures that arise due to the *maxim of quantity*. But if the pragmatic explanation proposed above is correct, they only need to be able to understand implicatures that arise due to the *maxim of relation*. Secondly, Noveck's findings are questionable. Chierchia et al. (2000) conducted a similar experiment and came to a different conclusion. In their experiment they told 15 children and 8 adults a story in which four boys had to choose between a skateboard and a bicycle. After telling the story, a puppet made the true and felicitous statement 'Each of the four boys chose a skateboard and a bicycle' while another puppet made the true but infelicitous statement 'Each of the four boys chose a skateboard or a bicycle'. The participants in the experiment had then the task to say which puppet described better what happened in the story. In this experiment there were no significant deviances: both the adults and the children said in almost all cases that the first puppet said it better. Based on these findings, Chierchia et al. conclude that children *do* understand scalar implicatures. According to their hypothesis, the deviances in Noveck's experiment are rather due to the fact that children cannot keep in mind formulations long enough in order to compare them with alternative formulations (i.e. when they only hear 'Some giraffes have long necks', they are not aware of the fact that one may also make the more informative statement 'All (or at least most) giraffes have long necks').

Thus, Leslie's second objection is not convincing either: firstly, it is doubtful whether the given empirical evidence is pertinent at all and, secondly, it is not robust enough in order to support the central premise of her objection.

4.3 A further worry

According to the explanation presented above, a (normative) utterance of the generic 'Boys don't cry' expresses that in general boys don't cry and additionally implicates that the addressee should behave like boys in general do via the maxim of relation. This explanation might give rise to a worry: conversational implicatures that arise due to the maxim of relation are usually *additive implicatures*, rather than *substitutional implicatures*. Additive

implicatures are ones that are conveyed *in addition* to the semantic content expressed, while substitutional implicatures are conveyed *instead* of the semantic content expressed (paradigm examples are, e.g., ironic statements that convey the opposite of the expressed content due to the maxim of quality).[9] However, as pointed out at the outset, one may use a generic like 'Boys don't cry' with normative force without believing and, thus, without expressing that in general boys don't cry. In such cases the implicature in question would have to be a substitutional implicature. But it is questionable whether there are any substitutional implicatures that arise due to the maxim of relation. Or so the worry goes.

However, the account presented here is not committed to the claim that in the cases at hand the normative force of generics is due to the presence of a substitutional implicature. For it appears natural to assume that just like *any other* kind of statement containing nouns (e.g. 'I want you to be a boy') the noun in generics like 'Boys don't cry' can be accompanied by the (pronounced or unpronounced) modifier 'real' (or 'ideal') that allows us to speak of only a subgroup of the group denoted by the noun. If a speaker sincerely utters 'Boys don't cry' even though she does not share the view that in general boys don't cry, then her utterance presumably contains the unpronounced modifier 'real' and, hence, expresses the content that real boys don't cry.[10] If so, the implicature in question—that the addressee should behave like a real boy—is an additive implicature just like in the other cases.

Thus, in order to fully account for the phenomenon at hand we need to assume that in some cases nouns like 'boys' are accompanied by the

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[9] Cp. Meibauer (2009) for the distinction between additive and substitutional implicatures, among others.

[10] According to Leslie, the phrase 'real Fs' cannot have the function to speak of a subgroup of the Fs. For, Leslie says, we can correctly use it in a statement like 'Hilary Clinton is the only [real] man in the Obama administration' even though Hilary Clinton is a woman (cp. Leslie 2015, 115). However, this observation can be explained in pragmatic terms again: in making this utterance one expresses an obvious falsehood and, thus, the listener will search for some other content that is conveyed (in the present case: that Clinton is the only person in the Obama administration that has the pertinent features of real men). Thus, Leslie's observation does not present any reason to depart from the standard view, according to which 'real' functions as a modifier.

pronounced or unpronounced modifier 'real'. But this assumption is harmless since it is an assumption we are readily willing to make with respect to other kinds of statements as well. Further, the resulting account is still not confronted with the difficulties that arise for Leslie's and Cohen's account. Firstly, in contrast to Leslie's account, it does not conflict in any way with Ockham's razor since the modifier 'real' is already contained in our lexicon and we thus do not have to add any further entries to our lexicon. Secondly, in contrast to Leslie's and Cohen's account, the account can accommodate the extent of the phenomenon since it does not rely on the assumption that the normative force of an utterance of 'Boys don't cry' is due to some specific kind of words contained in the utterance or to the construction itself. According to the account presented here, its normative force lies entirely in a Gricean implicature (i.e., that one should behave like a (real) boy) and, thus, arises at the level of pragmatics.

5. Conclusion

As has often been observed in the literature, generics such as 'Boys don't cry' allow for a descriptive as well as for a normative reading. According to the explanations that have been provided so far, this observation should be accounted for at the level of semantics. In contrast, the present paper has argued that we should rather account for it in terms of conversational implicatures that arise due to the maxim of relation. This proposal somewhat lightens the difficult task of finding the proper semantics of generics since it shows that at least one observation regarding generics need not be accounted for at the semantic level.

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