Contextual Restriction and Faultless Disagreement about Generics across Development

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Abstract

We report a study examining developmental changes in perceptions of disagreements among speakers who use generics to describe contextually-restricted or unrestricted regularities. Participants (65 adults and 222 5-12-year-olds) reacted to generic claims from two speakers who attributed ostensibly contradictory properties to a biological kind (e.g. "Xs are striped" and "Xs are spotted"). Crucially, we manipulated the scope of each speaker's claim, or its contextual restriction: whether they made a claim restricted to a specific context (island habitat), or an unrestricted claim. Participants were asked whether the speakers could "both be right" (faultless disagreement rating). Adults were sensitive to contextual restriction: they allowed for faultless disagreement when contextual restrictions mis-aligned (with additional differentiation among experimental conditions described below), and denied it when both speakers restricted to the same context. Young children demonstrated striking partial competence in faultless disagreement judgments much earlier than prior developmental literature suggested; however, their response pattern was not quite adult-like. This is the first study to document faultless disagreement between differentially restricted generics, both in adults and in children, and to start mapping developmental changes in this capacity. We discuss the developmental trajectory, and implications for social functioning and learning, and draw connections to semantic theories.

Keywords: generics; contextual restriction; faultless disagreement; cognitive development; communication

Background

Generics are a powerful tool for communication and learning, but the complexity of generic meanings makes profound misunderstandings possible whenever speakers and listeners hold different assumptions about the scope of target generalizations (i.e., generalizations that hold in a particular society, workplace, etc., vs. those that hold globally).

In this paper, we examined developmental changes in perceptions of disagreements among speakers who use generics to describe contextually-restricted or unrestricted regularities. To illustrate, consider the following scenario: one speaker says "customers leave tips" (talking about only US restaurants), and another says "customers don't leave tips" (a claim unrestricted to a specific context). On the surface, the two speakers made contradictory claims about the same phenomenon, but both can be correct if the claims have different scope. This constitutes so-called "faultless disagreement" - a phenomenon in which two people take different stances on a claim (*p* and not-*p*) and yet both can be correct (Kölbel, 2004; Barker, 2013; Kennedy, 2013), or a case of misunderstanding. Many theories of faultless disagreement differentiate it from mere misunderstanding (Kölbel, 2004; Lasersohn, 2005; Barker, 2013, cf. Glanzberg 2007; Stojanovic, 2007). But both also have commonalities; dealing with either requires an ability to navigate disagreement (real or perceived), and both can be assessed using the faultless disagreement task.

The ability to reconcile different perspectives is an important facet of social functioning, involved in managing genuine or perceived disagreements effectively (Amemiya et al., 2021). Grasping differences between genuine disagreements and differentially restricted generic claims is also important in science learning. For example, in a science class, a student might hear that water freezes at 32 F (an unrestricted claim), and that it freezes at -6 F and at -40 F (claims restricted to salt water and pure supercooled water, respectively). To understand these inputs without discrediting the teacher, the student must keep track of contextual restrictions across these claims. The ubiquity of situations where this skill is deployed raises the question of when and how this important capacity develops.

Thus, this study examined two ***research questions***: Q1. How do adults evaluate speaker (dis)agreement across a variety of matching and mismatching contextual restrictions? Q2. How does this capacity develop? At what age do children respond in an adult-like way, and are some combinations of contextual restrictions more challenging than others across development?

To address these questions, we conducted a study with adults and 5-12-year-old children. Our approach built upon Vasil et al. (ms) and Foushee & Srinivasan (2017), and utilized a child-friendly method for assessing faultlessness in the face of apparent disagreement. Participants learned about species on a novel planet, with unstable property distribution (e.g., striped trixmice dominate in five out of six habitats, but spotted trixmice dominate in the remaining habitat). Participants heard two speakers make generic claims about the species, attributing ostensibly conflicting properties (e.g.

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one asserted that "Trixmice are striped", while the other claimed "Trixmice are spotted"; or one claimed that "Karybats have white teeth" while the other one claimed that "Karybats have yellow teeth"). Participants indicated whether they thought the two speakers could ***both*** be right (faultless disagreement rating). Critically, each speaker either restricted their claim to one context (a specific island habitat), or made an unrestricted claim (about the planet, in general). This yielded four conditions of the Speaker Contextual Restriction variable: both speakers restrict to the same context, both speakers restrict to different contexts, one restricts and one does not, neither speaker restricts. For each combination, participants were asked "Could they both be right?".

We expected that adults would deny faultless disagreement (say no, they couldn't both be right) when both speakers restrict to the same context. The key question was whether participants would allow for faultless disagreement when the speakers restrict to different contexts, or when one speaker restricts and one does not. If participants understand the role of contextual restriction and can track two different perspectives, they should allow for faultless disagreement in both cases. Finally, when neither speaker restricts, two outcomes are possible: participants could either reject faultless disagreement (since technically the speakers made conflicting claims about "the same thing"), or they could endorse faultless disagreement (e.g., treating one generic as majority-characteristic and the other as existential: "kind members with this property exist"). We return to the existential reading of generics in the discussion.

With regards to predicting the developmental trajectory, existing evidence is mixed. On the one hand, we have reasons to expect that children in this age range should respond similarly to adults, at least in some conditions. For example, our prior work shows that adults and children as young as 6 years of age understand the difference between contextually-restricted and unrestricted generics in single-speaker tasks, with partial competence evident in children as young as 4 years of age (Vasil et al., ms). Even though prior work did not examine faultless disagreement, it does suggest that children have the requisite understanding of contextual restriction and might perform on par with adults. That said, developmentally, across conditions, we predicted that the "one restricts and one does not" condition would be the most cognitively challenging for children, as it requires comparing a subset to a superset, and it might emerge at a later time in development. The conditions where both speakers restrict to the same context, or both speakers restrict to different contexts, do not pose this challenge, and we expected the divergent endorsement of faultless disagreement in these two conditions (mirroring adults) to emerge relatively early.

On the other hand, prior work that examined other cases of faultless disagreement (not based on differential contextual restriction) revealed that it may take a surprisingly long time for children to appreciate that different unqualified claims involving predicates of personal taste ("X is yummy") and gradable adjectives ("X is tall") can be true: children do not start responding in an adult-like way on some of these tasks until 8-9 years of age (Foushee & Srinivasan, 2017; Holubar, 2015; Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997; Wellman & Liu, 2004). Managing faultless disagreement about contextually (un)restricted generics may be even more challenging, because it can occur even for non-subjective predicates, like "spotted" or "wear black hats" (and these were the kinds of predicates we used in this study). For generics in our study, the apparent disagreement stems not from divergent experiences, but from distinct clusters of regularities in the world, with some regularities holding broadly, and others only in restricted "bubbles" (Ritchie & Vasil, ms). Successful learners should be able to acquire information about both universal and restricted regularities, learning at multiple levels of pattern generality at once – without treating summaries of such regularities as standing in conflict, and striving to rule one out as necessarily false. To achieve that, they must be able to appreciate cases of faultless disagreement among contextually-restricted vs. unrestricted generic claims. The question is: do they?

Method

Participants

We recruited 222 5-12-year-olds (mean age 8.2 years, SD = 1.9), and 65 adults (mean age 36.2 years, SD = 11.3, range 18-70). Children were recruited in a local library, and local public events, and received small age-appropriate gifts. Adults participated online via Prolific and received $2.50. Adult sample is complete; developmental sample is largely complete; 44 11-12-year-olds remain to be tested.

Materials, Design and Procedure

The study was implemented as an illustrated story in Qualtrics. For children, an adult experimenter read the text, pointed at pictures and entered responses; adults completed the study online at their own pace.

On each trial, participants learned about a novel species (e.g. trixmice) on a fictional planet Pluke. Each species was characterized by an unstable property distribution, such that one property was dominant in five out of six contexts, and a different property was dominant in the remaining context: e.g., most trixmice living on five islands are striped, but most trixmice living on the remaining island are spotted. Visual aids helped participants keep track of the property distribution across habitats. Then, two speakers (puppet characters) made ostensibly conflicting generic claims about the species (e.g., one asserted that "Trixmice are striped", while the other claimed "Trixmice are spotted"). Critically, each speaker either restricted their claim to one context (a specific island), or made an unrestricted claim (about trixmice on the planet, in general). The *contextual restriction* variable had four conditions: both speakers restrict to the same context (R1.R1), both speakers restrict to different

contexts (R1.R2), one restricts and one does not (R1.NO), neither speaker restricts (NO.NO). For example, in the R1.NO condition, one speaker was making a poster about trixmice on a specific island, while the other speaker was making a poster about trixmice on planet Pluke (see Figure 1); the generic claims came from the two posters. After hearing different generic claims from each of the two speakers, the participant was asked if the speakers could "both be right". For children, we implemented a two-step response protocol commonly used in developmental research: first, the experimenter offered a binary choice between "yes" and "no"; after the child responded, the experimenter followed up with "for sure [yes / no] or maybe [yes / no?", yielding a response on a four-point generic endorsement scale ranging from "for sure no" to "for sure yes", with higher ratings indicating higher endorsement of faultless disagreement. Adults responded directly on the four-point scale displayed on the screen (Figure 2).

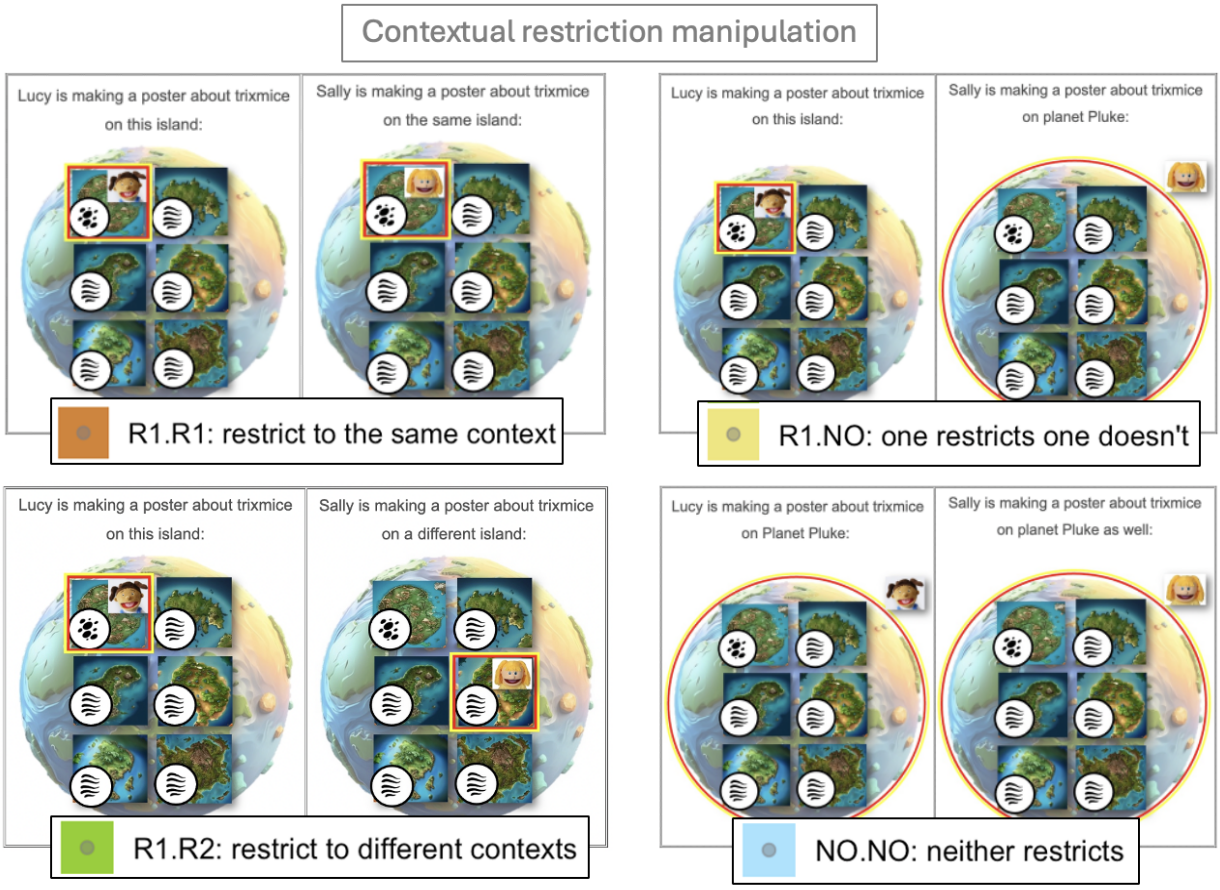

Figure 1: Summary of experimental conditions representing different combinations of speakers' contextual restriction.

Figure 2: Sample faultless disagreement rating question.

Contextual restriction was manipulated within participants; conditions rotated across four items (see Table 1), which were presented in random order. Each trial featured a new pair of speakers. Prior to rating the generic, participants completed comprehension checks to ensure they understood what each speaker's poster was about (specific island vs. planet), and received feedback. Additionally, to ensure that all participants understood what a poster is, and were comfortable signaling to a speaker that a claim was either right or not right, prior to the main experiment participants completed a short practice session where they helped make a poster about a well-known character (Mickey Mouse) and evaluated accurate and inaccurate claims. The study was pre-registered, and the materials are available in the OS.

Table 1: List of species and properties used in the study.

Species	Property 1	Property 2
Trixmice	Striped	Spotted
Yobugs	Sleep in trees	Sleep in caves
Karybats	Have white teeth	Have yellow teeth
Kua fish	Swim in circles	Swim in a straight line

Results

Faultless disagreement ratings were treated as an ordinal outcome, and analyzed in a logistic ordinal regression as a function of contextual restriction (both speakers restrict to the same context (R1.R1), speakers restrict to two different contexts (R1.R2), one speaker restricts to a context but the other one does not restrict (R1.NO), neither speaker restricts (NO.NO); sum contrasts) and age group (5-6, 7-8, 9-10, 11-12-year-olds and adults; sum contrasts) and their interaction entered as predictors, and allowing for random participant intercepts, using *clmm* command in R.

As shown in Figure 3, we observed a significant interaction between contextual restriction and age group, model Likelihood Ratio = 57.47, $p < .001$. We further examined this interaction by switching to treatment contrast coding of predictors and releveling the model to evaluate specific predicted effects; this approach does not require correction for multiple comparisons since the same model is queried. Additional comparisons to chance were implemented using non-parametric Wilcoxon tests.

First, as expected, adults were significantly more likely to allow for faultless disagreement between speakers who were talking about two different restricted contexts, each restricting their generic claim to a different island (R1.R2) compared to speakers who both restricted their claims to the same island (R1.R1), $b = 3.94$, $z = 9.25$, $p < .001$. Comparisons to chance confirmed that adults allowed for faultless disagreement in the former case, and denied it in the latter case (ps < .001). Interestingly, adults also allowed for faultless disagreement in the remaining two conditions where one of the speakers made an unrestricted claim (ps < .001). However, in these two conditions adults were not as certain about the possibility of faultless disagreement as they were in the benchmark R1.R2 condition (where speakers who made different claims clearly talked about two different islands; comparisons vs. R1.NO $b = 1.54$, $z = 3.80$, $p < .001$; vs NO.NO $b = 1.10$, $z = 2.72$, $p = .007$; the R1.NO and NO.NO conditions did not differ, $b = .43$, $z = 1.21$, $p = .216$).

Second, examination of children's responses revealed interesting developmental changes. The youngest group, 5-6-year-olds, already displayed some, but not all, elements of the adults' pattern, albeit in a weaker form. Like adults, they differentiated between cases where speakers restricted generic claims to the same vs. different contexts, allowing for faultless disagreement significantly more when speakers

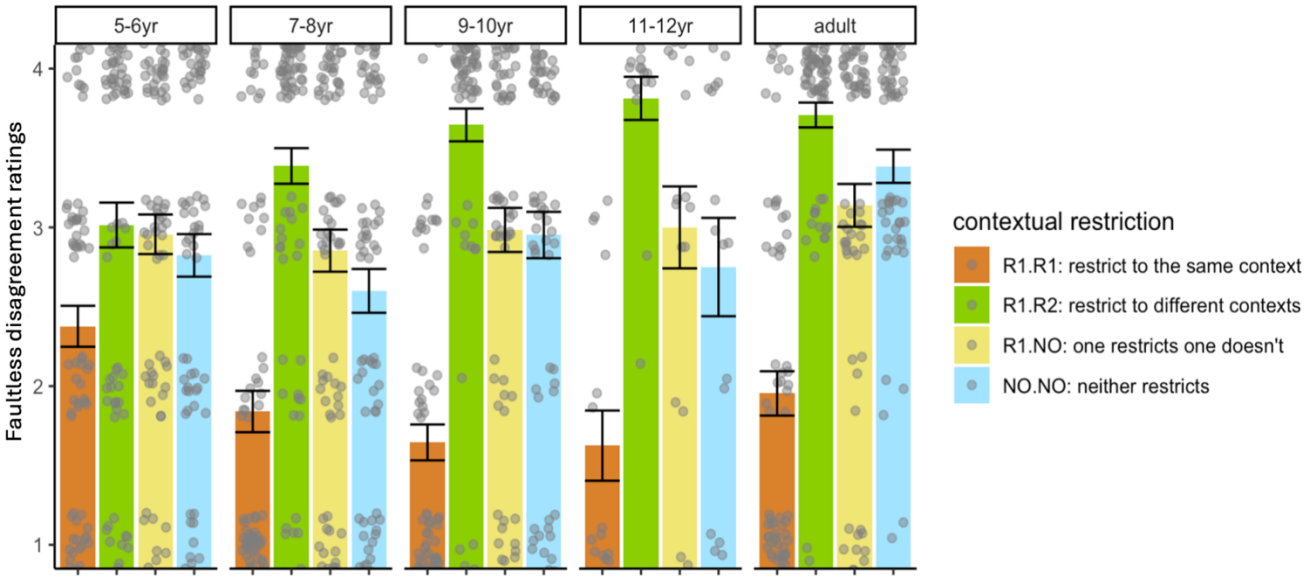

Figure 3: Faultless disagreement ratings (can both speakers be right?), as a function of contextual restriction and participant age. Gray dots show individual datapoints; error bars represent ±1 SEM. Ratings were treated as ordinal data for analyses, but the visual summaries treat data as interval.

talked about two different islands (R1.R2), $b = 1.29$, $z = 3.84$, $p < .001$, above-chance faultless disagreement ratings, $p < .001$. While the ratings in the R1.R1 condition (where speakers made contrasting claims while restricting to the same context) were low relative to the R1.R2 condition, they did not drop below chance, $p = .356$, in contrast to adults. Thus, this part of the pattern (R1.R1 vs. R1.R2 comparison) mirrored adults, but in a weaker form.

The second part of adults' pattern – a drop in faultless disagreement ratings in the two conditions involving unrestricted claims, relative to the "benchmark" faultless disagreement condition (R1.R2) – was not present in the youngest group (vs. R1.NO $b = .21$, $z = .62$, $p = .536$; vs. NO.NO $b = .43$, $z = 1.29$, $p = .196$). That said, 5-6-year-olds' ratings in these conditions were significantly higher compared to the R1.R1 condition (where both speakers restrict to the same context, making faultless disagreement unlikely; vs. R1.NO $b = 1.08$, $z = 3.81$, $p < .001$; vs. NO.NO $b = .85$, $z = 2.67$, $p = .008$), and significantly higher than chance (R1.NO $p < .001$, NO.NO $p = .020$).

With age, children demonstrated an increasingly adult-like pattern in responses, as shown in Figure 3. Due to space limitations and the clarity of the pattern, we omit details of the remaining age-group comparisons here, but we make them available in the Online Supplement.

Discussion

We examined the developmental trajectory of faultless disagreement judgments about speakers who restrict or do not restrict their generic claims to a specific context. We found that adults were sensitive to contextual restriction, as predicted: they denied faultless disagreement (i.e., said that the speakers could *not* both be right) when both speakers restricted to the same context. We also found that adults generally allowed for faultless disagreement when contextual restrictions mis-aligned. But, interestingly, their reactions showed a further fine-grained differentiation among different combinations of contextual restriction. When one or both speakers made an unrestricted claim (i.e. about the species on the planet in general), adults were not as certain about the possibility of faultless disagreement as they were in the benchmark condition where speakers who made different claims clearly talked about two different islands.

This produced three "clusters" of faultless disagreement ratings: (1) scenarios where adults clearly denied faultless disagreement (when two speakers make different generic claims about the same restricted context, adults thought they can't both be right); (2) scenarios where adults confidently allowed faultless disagreement (when sources of different claims talked about two different islands, adults thought they could both be right), and (3) scenarios where adults allowed for faultless disagreement but were less confident. The latter "cluster" included the "one restricts and one does not" and "neither speaker restricts". We speculate that the relatively high ratings in this cluster might reflect participants' sensitivity to variability in the data (such that the unrestricted context, the planet, does include a subset of outliers, e.g. spotted trixmice), and/or participants' pluralistic approach to generics, allowing for the possibility that one speaker made a (majority) characteristic generic claim, while the other intended an existential interpretation of the claim ("there are kind members with this property"). When designing the study, we assumed the existential reading would be unlikely in the context of deciding what to put on a poster about a group - but perhaps we were wrong. After all, existential interpretations are common in everyday speech; e.g., one may have seen signs like "our medical staff speak English, Spanish, Urdu, and Swahili" posted even if only a couple of staff members speak Urdu. Despite their commonality, existentials have not been studied much in the psychological literature (see Cohen & Erteschik-Shir, 2002 for theoretical discussion). Our findings suggest that they may deserve more attention.

A related, but different mechanism that could produce this pattern is based on an asymmetry in criteria for accepting a generic and denying it: e.g., while there may not be enough spotted trixmice to assert or agree that "trixmice are spotted", there may still be too many spotted trixmice to assert or agree that "trixmice are *not* spotted" (see Cimpian et al., 2010, for a related discussion of asymmetries in generic acceptance vs. production, and Tessler & Goodman, 2019, on prevalence thresholds in negations). To deny the possibility of faultless disagreement in our study is to imply that one of the speakers is wrong. This could elicit conflicting intuitions when both speakers make unrestricted claims: on the one hand, participants might feel not in a position to deny either speaker's assertion (e.g., say "no, trixmice are not spotted"), but at the same time participants might feel that two contrasting assertions about "the same thing" at least on the surface present a contradiction, such that one of them should be wrong. This could result in increased uncertainty and dampened ratings in the NO.NO (both do not restrict) condition, relative to the "both restrict to different contexts", as we saw.

In addition to documenting an intriguing pattern of intuitions about faultless disagreement in adults, we documented a striking partial competence in assessing faultless disagreement in 5-6-year olds – much earlier than prior developmental literature suggested. As reviewed above, the appreciation of faultless disagreement about predicates of personal taste and gradable adjectives does not typically emerge until after 8 or 9 years of age. Yet, in our task we are seeing much younger children allowing for faultless disagreement. Crucially, it is not just an overall agreement bias: even our youngest group differentiated between "speakers restrict to the same context" and "speakers restrict to different context" conditions, giving higher faultless disagreement ratings to the latter, like adults did. Our study did not directly compare faultless disagreement judgments about predicates of personal taste/gradable adjectives (e.g., 'big') and differentially restricted claims, so we can only speculate about the procedural and conceptual differences that might have contributed to the divergent developmental trajectories.

On the procedural side, children's success in our task might be driven by the *explicit* nature of our task. As opposed to perhaps more common cases of implicit contextual restriction where the scope of the claim is inferred from where the speakers are, their prior conversation, etc., we explicitly pointed out what each speaker was making a poster about, and offered visual aids inviting comparison across speakers. In contrast, in studies assessing children's intuitions about subjective and/or relative attributes, there is typically no equivalent explicit statement ("A is talking/making a poster about about his/her/their personal taste" or "A is making this claim about height relative to the sample of pimwits they had seen").

Differences could also arise due to the *spatial* nature of the task: our task contrasted claims about different locations. Perhaps, it is relatively easy to understand, mentally represent, and compare different spatial regions that affect the scopes of two claims - in contrast to understanding, representing and comparing less tangible things like personal tastes and other mental states. This raises an intriguing possibility that contextual restriction involving locations may be a cognitive scaffold helping children understand different perspectives (e.g., aesthetic, epistemic) and more challenging instances of faultless disagreement. Children may get to "practice" detecting opportunities for faultless disagreement between differentially restricted claims partially in virtue of their ability to think about different places, and then build upon the newly developed skill to master faultless disagreement about subjective and scalar predicates. To test the role of spatial restrictions, future work ought to consider other restrictions to, e.g., differences across time or different religious communities living in the same place (Srinivasan et al., 2018).

Another salient feature of our task is linguistic: we used *generics*. While generics are a complex linguistic and philosophical phenomenon, they are common in child-directed speech, and some have argued are a cognitive default (Leslie, 2008). Relatively early success on our task might be further evidence of children's facility with generics.

Alternatively, the linguistic phenomena and mechanisms involved in cases of apparent disagreements between conflicting (un)restricted generics and conflicting uses of predicates of personal taste and gradable adjectives might differ in more substantive ways. We've argued in other work that contextually restricted generics involve an implicit restriction so that, for instance, "Trixmice are spotted" could be used to express *On Island 1, Trixmice are spotted* (Ritchie & Vasil, ms). Here context – in the form of, e.g., the topic of conversation (or question under discussion; Roberts, 1996, 2012) or features of the environment like the location – restricts the generalization to only some situations or a "bubble". If two speakers restrict in different ways (as in our R1.R2) they are not expressing contradicting things. Rather, one is expressing something like *On Island 1, Trixmice are spotted* and the other is expressing *On Island 2, Trixmice are striped.* They aren't in a genuine disagreement.

Some linguists and philosophers argue that contextual restriction also explains faultless disagreement with predicates of personal taste (Glanzberg, 2007; Stojanovic, 2007). On these accounts predicates of personal taste involve a contextual parameter for a judge or evaluator. For example, one speaker saying "Okra is tasty" might express *Okra is tasty for speaker 1.* Another speaker seeming to deny the same thing might express *Okra is not tasty for speaker 2*. Here too there isn't strictly speaking disagreement (but see, e.g., Zakkou (2019) and Stojanovic & Zakkou (2025) for discussion of contextualist views that involve real disagreement). Others argue that faultless disagreement involves genuine disagreement that is metalinguistic in nature (Barker, 2013; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013; Sundell, 2011, 2016) or about the truth of a claim relative to different judges (Kölbel, 2003; Lasersohn, 2005).

While we cannot adjudicate these debates here, our findings suggest two routes for further investigation. First, they could suggest that the correct analysis of other cases of faultless disagreement (e.g., with words like 'tasty') is not contextualist, but something different and more cognitively demanding. For instance, perhaps disagreements with predicates like "tasty" require understanding ways we might dispute and negotiate about thresholds (for tastiness, being rich…) that are difficult for children to grasp. In contrast, apparent disagreement with generics involves contextual restriction, which is easier to understand. This possibility suggests an intriguing way in which developmental psychology might provide evidence relevant for semantics. Alternatively, even if a contextualist view is the best explanation for all cases of faultless disagreement (with generics, predicates of personal taste…), our findings could provide evidence that some contextual parameters are easier for children to interpret than others. For instance, it might be easier to navigate location-relative claims than judge-relative claims.

These explanations will need to be assessed in future work, alongside assessing the generalizability of our findings to different types of contextual restrictions, different types of attributes (going beyond behavioral properties and appearances), etc. At the very least, our findings highlight that the developmental trajectory for faultless disagreement might differ across different sorts of claims (generics v. predicates of personal taste) and/or different sorts of restrictions (spatial v. perspectival). They also have implications for formal teaching contexts, where learners might benefit from explicit contextual restriction of claims (e.g. "water freezes at -6 F" clearly placed on a poster about salt water might help young learners see this claim as compatible with "water freezes at 32 F").

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to document recognition of faultless disagreement between differentially restricted generics, both in adults and in children. We hope this work will stimulate new inquiry into this important capacity recruited in learning from multiple sources and navigating the natural and social world more broadly.

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Online supplement

https://osf.io/3nmz5/?view_only=da3958dada5c445191b6294352b9482f

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