



‘You do it like this!’: Impersonal pronouns and generalisations

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Introduction

- ❖ Bare impersonals like the following seem to express a mix of statistical and prescriptive claims:
 - (1) You make coffee like this
 - (2) This is how you write a philosophy paper
- ❖ Why and how does this mixed reading arise?
- ❖ We propose to treat bare impersonals as indefinite singular generics

Study 1: The basic phenomenon

- ❖ Bare impersonals were directly compared to clearly statistical sentences and clearly prescriptive sentences.
- ❖ Participants (n=365, Clicktracker, German native speakers) were given five statements (two overtly prescriptive, two overtly statistical, one bare impersonal) about a story frame and asked to what degree these statements matched a randomly assigned claim that was either statistical or prescriptive
- ❖ The mean scores of the statistical and prescriptive questions were compared for each statement
- ❖ The bare impersonal was almost as prescriptive as clearly prescriptive statements and almost as statistical as clearly statistical statements

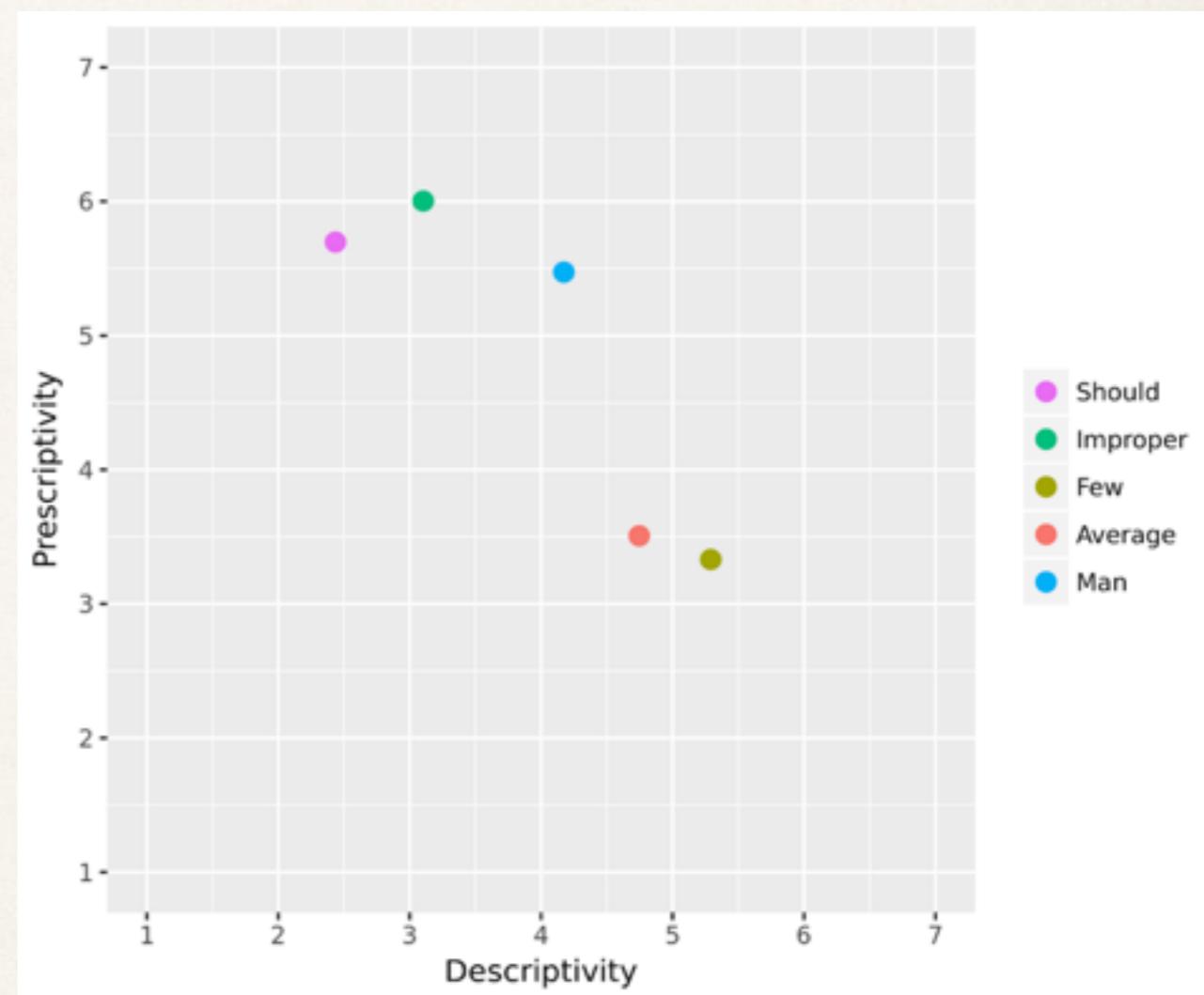


Figure 1

Study 2: Comparison with Generics

- ❖ Bare impersonals and certain corresponding generics were compared for a similar mix of statistical and prescriptive considerations
- ❖ Participants (n=445, Amazon MTurk, English native speaker) were given bare impersonal, IS generic, and BP generic forms of the same claim about a story frame and asked to what degree these statements matched a randomly assigned claim that was either statistical or prescriptive
- ❖ While the BP generic consistently rated lower than the impersonal on prescriptivity, it is also rated higher than the impersonal on two of three statistical questions. Contrastingly, the IS generic does not show any difference from the impersonal sentence, on either the prescriptive or the statistical questions.
- ❖ This is shown in Figure 2, which treats the mean of the three prescriptive questions as a measure of prescriptivity (y-axis) and the mean of the three descriptive questions as a measure of statisticality (x-axis)

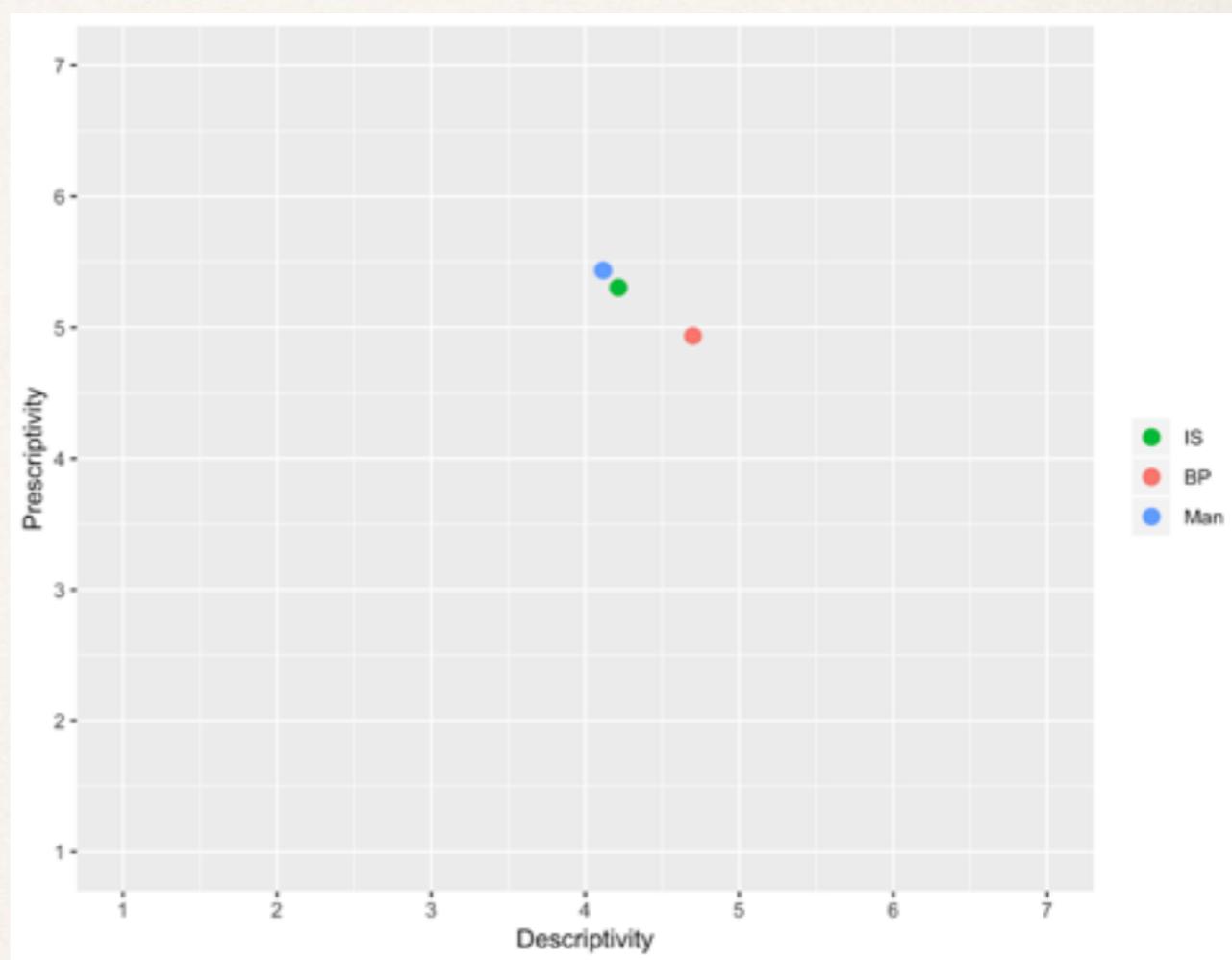


Figure 2

Bare Impersonals as IS Generics

- ❖ Our studies support the claim that bare impersonals are IS generics
- ❖ Linguists and psychologists have observed that IS generics typically convey that a principled connection holds between members of the kind and the property in question (cf. Greenberg 2003; Prasada and Dillingham 2006)
- ❖ Impersonal pronouns allow generalisations that abstract away from any particular property of the individuals in question. Consider:
 - (1) A philosopher makes coffee like this
 - (2) You make coffee like this
- ❖ Just as (1) expresses that there is a principled connection between a philosopher making coffee and doing so like this, (2) uses exactly this same notion of principled connection, but abstracts away from any information about what kind of entity is involved