

# The Priority of Resolutional Semantics

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February 2015

In “[Specifying ‘Just Governments,’](#)” I argued for a *generic* interpretation of the resolution. On this interpretation, the resolution is not about whether *some* just governments ought to require that employers pay a living wage—which would be an existential reading of the resolution—but rather about whether just governments *in general* ought to require that employers pay a living wage; specifying particular governments, then, is not sufficient to affirm.

I offered two arguments for the generic interpretation. The first argument was semantic: I argued that the sentence, “Just governments ought to require that employers pay a living wage,” expresses a generic proposition, as any competent speaker of English would recognize. The second argument was pragmatic: I argued that only the generic interpretation can explain the irrelevance of the trolly negative observation that there are no just governments; it would be bad for fairness and education if this observation were relevant, and most debaters rightly agree that it is irrelevant, so they must accept the generic interpretation. There is a technical, philosophical distinction between “semantics” and “pragmatics”; that is not how I am using the terms here. I call an argument *semantic* if it appeals to what the resolution *means*. I call an argument *pragmatic* if it appeals to the benefits of interpreting the resolution in some way.

I have heard no semantic argument for the existential interpretation, although I have heard a few pragmatic arguments for it. The pragmatic arguments are mostly recycled arguments that people would make regardless of the topic, and I do not find them compelling. But I believe that these pragmatic considerations are irrelevant. As I wrote in my previous article,

The existential interpretation is not even, as I see it, eligible. So its pragmatic benefits are irrelevant. Compare: I think it would be better if the resolution were, “It is not the case that just governments

ought to . . . .” But that’s not the resolution, so it’s not even an eligible interpretation in a T debate.

But I offered no arguments for this view about the priority of resolutional semantics. It was just an assumption, and perhaps the most controversial assumption in my article. I would now like to defend this assumption.

My view probably seems obvious to some people and incoherent to others. Outsiders to national circuit LD may find it ridiculous that anyone would find it necessary to defend it at such length. But some circuit LDers may think that my view rests on a conceptual confusion about topicality. Argumentation theorists, however, have defended the priority of semantics in the context of CEDA (Murphy 1994), NPDA (Merrell 2015), and NFA LD (Diers 2010) debate. Why should the view be coherent in these contexts but not in high school LD? Or do these authors simply fail to understand what topicality means? I don’t think that either hypothesis is very credible.

Murphy, Merrell, and Diers argue that pragmatic considerations are circular, unverifiable, self-undermining, subjective, non-unique, and ungrounded in argumentation theory. I agree with *some* of those arguments, and I shall not rehearse them here.<sup>1</sup> I shall instead focus on the case *for* the priority of semantics.

The article comes in three sections. In section 1, I offer a simple argument for the semantic approach. This approach is grounded in the requirement to debate the resolution. But if this requirement is justified by appeals to fairness and education, then shouldn’t we just compare interpretations with respect to those values? I explain why we shouldn’t. I also explain how my view is less vulnerable to critiques of topicality than the pragmatic approach. In section 2, I discuss the parametric conception of topicality, which some have thought justifies the pragmatic approach and, more specifically, the use of plans regardless of resolutional semantics. I argue that the parametric conception, when properly clarified, does not justify either implication. In section 3, I consider the objection that pragmatic considerations have semantic impacts because debate is a unique context with its own lexicon. This objection, I believe, requires much further evidence before it can justify the pragmatic approach to resolutional interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup>I would suggest cutting Merrell and maybe Diers for these arguments. They also cite many articles that I haven’t mentioned here, on both sides of the issue. My purpose in mentioning these authors is not to appeal to authority or consensus here. I think such appeals have little value in the theory of LD debate.

Let me make three caveats before defending my view. First, my view is not that pragmatic reasons are completely irrelevant to resolutorial interpretation. I think, rather, that they should be *lexically* inferior to semantic reasons. (Think of the priority of basic liberties over equality in Rawls’s conception of justice.) Pragmatic considerations cannot justify interpretations that are ruled out on semantic grounds. If the resolution does not mean X, then it doesn’t matter how much better it would be to debate X. But if the resolution might mean either X or Y, then the topicality debate can come down to pragmatic considerations. But note that the debate between “competing interpretations” and “reasonability” is relevant here: if the resolution is truly ambiguous between X and Y, then even if X does better than Y on pragmatic grounds, the affirmative might have the right to select a reasonable but suboptimal interpretation. But this question does not, I think, affect the priority of semantic considerations.

Second, my view is not that plans are bad. On the contrary, I think that plans are good, but only when they affirm the resolution. Whether some plan affirms their resolution (i.e., whether it is topical) is a function of the resolution’s semantics. To repeat, I have nothing against plans in general, and I believe that specification of some resolutorial parameter may be permissible, if not obligatory, on many topics. One of the great things about LD is that our resolutions are diverse not only in their subject matter but also in their structure. This requires debaters to analyze each resolution with a fresh eye and not simply to import concepts and assumptions that may have applied to old resolutions into theoretical norms for each new one. But when the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. It is easier to continue with the same assumptions, as long as they are sufficiently shared by one’s peers on the national circuit, rather than reinventing the theoretical wheel every two months. It is important to resist this temptation and not to ignore the meaning of the resolution, even and especially if you may be more comfortable debating a different resolution.

Third, I do not think my view is best captured by the label “Textuality First,” under which some circuit LDers often seem to lump all semantic arguments. I think this label came into use around 2007 or so, and it strikes me as uninformative: it’s like making “topicality” your standard for topicality. The meaning of the resolution is not just one consideration among others. The extant literature favors an alternative strategy. Murphy, Merrell, and Diers classify various standards as truth-based or accuracy-seeking (e.g., intent, field context, grammar, source credibility, common usage, etc.) and others as non-truth-based or debate-based (e.g., ground and limits). I have instead suggested a distinction between semantic and pragmatic considerations. These minor differences in classification are not important. The important point is that what the resolution means is not just

one consideration among others, and that there may be conflicting semantic considerations to be weighed. I suspect that many debaters lump semantic arguments under a single “textuality” standard because they don’t know of a more descriptive label to distinguish each of their arguments. Let me emphasize, then, that the label shouldn’t matter: one-word names for standards help the judge organize her flow and perhaps improve word economy in rebuttals, but debaters should feel free to make arguments without pigeonholing them.

## 1 Debating the Resolution

One reason why LDers may be suspicious of my view is because they see topicality as just another theory argument. But unlike other theory arguments, topicality involves two “interpretations.” The first is an interpretation, in the ordinary sense of the word, of the resolution or of some part of it. The second is a *rule*—namely, that the affirmative must defend the resolution.<sup>2</sup> If we don’t distinguish between these two interpretations, then the negative’s view is merely that the affirmative must defend whatever proposition they think should be debated, not because it is the proposition expressed by the resolution, but rather because it would be good to debate. This failure to see what is distinctive about topicality leads quickly to the pragmatic approach, by ignoring what the interpretation is supposed to be an interpretation *of*.

By contrast, the topicality rule—i.e., that the affirmative must defend the resolution—justifies the semantic approach. This rule is justified by appeals to fairness and education: it would be unfair to expect the negative to prepare against anything other than the resolution, because that is the only mutually acceptable basis for preparation; the educational benefits that are unique to debate stem from clash focused on a proposition determined beforehand. The inference to the priority of semantic considerations is simple. Consider the following argument:

1. We ought to debate the resolution.
2. The resolution means X.

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<sup>2</sup>Diers proposes a change to the structure of T arguments which may capture the difference between T and other theory arguments. On Diers’s model, T has a three-part structure: first, the resolitional interpretation, which includes not only definitions but also the standards and tests for meeting the interpretation; second, the violation, which explains how the affirmative advocacy fails to meet the test described; and third, the reasons why the affirmative must be topical. I don’t necessarily endorse this model, but I think it is a good idea to think more creatively about the structure of topicality (and many other) arguments, given the arbitrariness of many structural conventions in LD.

Therefore,

3. We ought to debate X.

The first premise is just the topicality rule. The second premise is that X is the semantically correct interpretation. Pragmatic considerations for or against X do not, in themselves, support or deny this second premise. They might show that it would be better or worse *if* the resolution meant X, but sentences do not in general mean what it would be best for them to mean. At best, pragmatic considerations may show that we should debate some proposition other than the resolution. They are (if anything) reasons to *change* the topic, contrary to the topicality rule. Pragmatic considerations must, therefore, be weighed against the justifications for the topicality rule, *not* against the semantic considerations: they are objections to the first premise, not the second premise, in the argument above.

### 1.1 The Topicality Rule vs. Pragmatic Considerations

There is an obvious objection to my argument above. If the topicality rule is justified for reasons that have to do with fairness and education, then shouldn't we just directly appeal to such considerations when determining what proposition we ought to debate? There are at least three ways I see of responding to this objection.

One way admits that such pragmatic considerations are relevant—i.e., they are reasons to change the topic—but holds that they are outweighed by the reasons for the topicality rule. It would be better if everyone debated the resolution as worded, whatever it is, than if everyone debated whatever subtle variation on the resolution they favored. Affirmatives would unfairly abuse (and have already abused) the entitlement to choose their own unpredictable adventure, and negatives would respond (and have already responded) with strategies that are designed to avoid clash—including an essentially vigilantist approach to topicality in which debaters enforce their own pet resolutions on an arbitrary, round-by-round basis. Think here of the utilitarian case for internalizing rules against lying, murder, and other intuitively wrong acts. As the great utilitarian Henry Sidgwick argued, wellbeing is maximized not by everyone doing what they think maximizes wellbeing, but rather (in general) by people sticking to the rules of common sense morality. Otherwise, people are more likely to act on mistaken utility calculations and engage in self-serving violations of useful rules,

thereby undermining social practices that promote wellbeing in the long run. That is exactly what happens if we reject the topicality rule in favor of direct appeals to pragmatic considerations. Sticking to a rule that applies regardless of the topic, of the debaters' preferred variations on the topic, and of debaters' familiarity with the national circuit's flavor of the week, avoids these problems.

A second strategy denies that such pragmatic benefits are relevant. This strategy is more deontological. One version of this strategy appeals to the importance of consent or agreement. Suppose that you give your opponents prior notice that you'll be affirming the September/October 2012 resolution instead of the current one. There is a sense in which your affirmation of that resolution is now predictable: your opponents know, or are in a position to know, what you will be defending. And suppose that the older resolution is conducive to better (i.e., more fair and more educational) debate. Still, it's unfair of you to expect your opponents to follow suit. Why? Because they didn't *agree* to debate that topic. They registered for a tournament whose invitation specified the current resolution, not the Sept/Oct 2012 resolution or a free-for-all. The "social contract" argument for topicality holds that accepting a tournament invitation constitutes implicit consent to debate the specified topic. This claim might be contested, depending on what constitutes implicit consent. What is less contestable is this: given that *some* proposition must be debated in each round and that the tournament has specified a resolution, no one can reasonably reject a principle that requires everyone to debate the announced resolution as worded. This appeals to Scanlon's contractualism. Someone who wishes to debate only the announced resolution has a strong claim against changing the topic, and no one has a stronger claim against debating the announced resolution (ignoring, for now, some possible exceptions to be discussed in the next subsection). So it is unfair to expect your opponent to debate anything other than the announced resolution. This unfairness is a constraint on the pursuit of education or other goods: it wrongs and is unjustifiable to your opponent.

Another deontological argument might appeal to legitimate authority. The NSDA is the only entity with the legitimate authority to determine the topics. This process begins with a committee: anyone can sit in on the committee's meetings and suggest topics on their website. The process ends with a democratic voting procedure. Some philosophers believe that democratic procedures generate obligations to obey rules. This would yield an obligation to debate the resolution as worded. And some philosophers believe that legitimate authorities can generate reasons that exclude (not merely outweigh) other considerations that would usually be relevant. If your teachers instruct you to do something, then you don't get to weigh up the reasons for or against it; you just have to do

it.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, although the fact that some proposition would be good to debate would usually be a reason to debate it, or a reason for the NSDA to propose it and for debaters to vote for it, that fact is irrelevant and no longer a reason if that proposition is not the chosen resolution.

Here is a third kind of response to the view that we should directly appeal to pragmatic considerations when evaluating topicality. This view justifies debating propositions that are completely irrelevant to the resolution but are much better to debate. Once you say that pragmatic benefits can justify debating a proposition that isn't really what the resolution means, or that the resolution means whatever it would be best for it to mean, there is no principled way of requiring any particular threshold of similarity in order to be an eligible interpretation of the resolution. This means that the pragmatic approach justifies affirmatives that have nothing to do with the resolution. Of course some see no problem with non-topical affirmatives whose impacts outweigh the reasons to debate the resolution. But suppose you want a *principled* response to such strategies. You have one if you take seriously the idea that the debate should be about the resolution, and the idea that the proposition expressed by the resolution is independent of what proposition would be best to debate. Without a commitment to debating the proposition that the resolution actually means, I don't think there is a principled response to such strategies, as I discuss below.

## 1.2 Critiques of Topicality

My approach interacts pretty straightforwardly with critiques that see topicality (either in general or on this specific topic) as oppressive. Debaters often respond to critiques of topicality by pointing out the emancipatory or other outweighing benefits of acting like policy-makers (without explaining who is supposed to enjoy these benefits), by distinguishing between different kinds of fairness (without grounding or situating this distinction in the philosophical literature on fairness), and by going hard for theory (without appealing to an actual *theory* of debate pedagogy). These strategies feed the link: it probably *is* exclusionary to make up hoops for one's opponents to jump through, in the form of pseudo-rules, -concepts, and -impacts designed to force them to debate on one's favored terms, even if one's intentions are good. And the initial link is, I think, usually pretty credible, because the status quo approach to topicality is based on how one wants one's opponents to debate, not on the meaning of a sentence that is accessible and, in principle, knowable to everyone. It reeks of the advice, given by some

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<sup>3</sup>See Raz (2009).

debate instructors, to run theory against any ways in which one's current debate round falls short of the round one most wishes to debate.

The semantic approach to topicality, by contrast, appeals to an impartial rule requiring students to debate the resolution, whatever it means, regardless of what one wants it or thinks it would be best for it to mean. Some might think that this rule is still objectionably exclusionary. But that claim is much less credible than the link to topicality as many currently run it. Let's briefly consider three possible arguments for the claim.

First, some might argue that the notion of "meaning" on which the semantic approach is based is illusory and oppressive. I realize that some authors claim to hold this view, but I don't take it very seriously. If it were illusory, then how could the judge grasp the meaning of the argument? And would it really be oppressive to point out that some extension of an argument isn't what the original argument *meant*, and is therefore new? There may be a much more credible claim in the vicinity. For example, suppose that the affirmative interprets some word or phrase in the resolution in African American Vernacular English, and the negative objects to this interpretation on semantic dialects because it's "incorrect" English. There is good reason to reject this objection as false and oppressive, because of its assumption that some spoken dialects are objectively wrong, sloppy, or inferior to others. But this kind of scenario is much more specific than the generic objection to the semantic approach.<sup>4</sup> The fact that many dialects are legitimate does not deny that words in each dialect mean things.

Second, some might argue that a requirement to debate the resolution is oppressive because it excludes debaters who want to argue about other things. But that strikes me as no more exclusionary than speech times: sure, you can continue talking after the time runs out, but the judge isn't going to vote on what you say.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, you can talk about whatever you want, but if it doesn't support or deny the resolution, then the judge shouldn't vote on it.<sup>6</sup>

Third, some might argue that this particular topic is harmful to debate, and so

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<sup>4</sup>Moreover, I'm not sure that this scenario is likely to arise, because although African American Vernacular English has a distinctive phonology and grammatical features, there are few words or phrases that appear in resolutions with completely different referents, as far as I know.

<sup>5</sup>And the judge would be right to simply vote against you for interrupting your opponent's prep or speech time.

<sup>6</sup>The persuasiveness of this response may depend on whether topicality is run as a voting issue rather than a way of framing certain arguments as relevant or irrelevant. I have argued elsewhere that T should not, by default, be a voting issue, and that one shouldn't lose for making irrelevant arguments. But this view is independent of what I am arguing here.

we should reject a requirement to debate the resolution in this particular case. This argument, I think, is the most important objection to the topicality rule. This is because it challenges my claim that the topicality rule is justifiable to everyone, and that no one's claim against debating the announced resolution is as strong as one's claim against changing the topic. It also interacts with my claim about the democratic legitimacy of the topic selection process, in ways that raise serious questions about the community and debaters' obligations within it. And it is not *crazy* to think that some resolutions are harmful to debate. Many thought this about the domestic violence topic. Enough people thought it about a Public Forum topic in 2010—"Resolved: An Islamic cultural center should be built near Ground Zero"—that the NSDA changed the resolution (to "Resolved: High school Public Forum Debate resolutions should not confront sensitive religious issues") *and* instituted a democratic procedure for topic selection. It is interesting to think about what debaters would have had most reason to do if the NSDA had not changed the topic.

I don't think there is a magic-bullet response to critiques of *the topic*, as opposed to critiques of topicality in general. I think they must be answered on a case-by-case basis, in their own terms. But one advantage of my view is that it provides a better framing for this debate. The question boils down to whether or not the topic is harmful for students to debate, and whether those harms justify breaking, or making an exception to, the topicality rule.<sup>7</sup> This burden should be fairly difficult (but not impossible) to meet, because of the advantages of a topicality rule that applies regardless of the topic. The arguments for the topicality rule establish, at the very least, a default presumption in favor of debating the topic. The pragmatic approach to topicality, however, asks which proposition would be *best* to debate.<sup>8</sup> It is extremely unlikely that the chosen resolution would be *best* to debate, even if it is not particularly harmful: there are almost certainly more important questions to discuss. This framing of the debate strikes me as silly: no one thinks or ever should think that the chosen resolution is the best possible proposition to debate; nor should that matter—students should, in general, debate the chosen resolution even if (or even though) the topic committee could have put better ones on the list. The semantic approach offers a more sensible threshold for when one should disobey the topicality rule.

Some may be curious about two kinds of affirmative positions that are *somewhat*

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<sup>7</sup>There are, of course, further questions about what should be done if it is harmful. I'm just assuming, for the sake of argument, that *if* the topic is harmful to debate in ways that are not acknowledged by most debaters and educators in the community, then there may be a good case for disobedience in a debate round (as opposed to, say, expecting students not to debate for the duration of the topic).

<sup>8</sup>At least, when this approach is combined with competing interpretation.

grounded in the resolution, but in unconventional ways. First, some affirmatives discuss the resolution's topic area but do not affirm the resolution as stated. That is, in my view, not topical: the resolution is a proposition, not a mere topic area. That it is a proposition is what makes the round a *debate*, rather than a discussion, and is crucial to testing and rewarding the kinds of skills that debate is designed to promote. This is one regrettable feature of the technical term "topicality," because although we may describe the topic of some debate as "the living wage," that is not the resolution. Talking about the topic, even in a positive way, does not suffice for affirming the resolution. Second, some affirmatives read phrases in the resolution in figurative, unconventional ways, and affirm the resolution so interpreted. That may, in my view, be topical: one merely needs *evidence* that the expressions in the resolution actually have the metaphorical meaning at hand. Such interpretations must be argued and answered on a case-by-case basis. The pragmatic costs (and benefits) of metaphorical interpretation are not enough, on my view, to rule those interpretations out (or in).

## 2 The Parametric Conception of Topicality

Another reason why some might be resistant to the priority of semantic considerations has to do with a more general view about the role of the resolution. According to the *parametric* view, topical advocacies are all and only those that fall within the parameter or boundary set by the resolution.<sup>9</sup> This view is the basis for such metaphors as "division of ground" and "limits." Proponents of this view might reject my premise above that we should debate the resolution. Instead, the affirmative should pick an advocacy that falls within the boundary of the resolution. This boundary must, therefore, be set fairly.

It's not clear to me that the parametric approach makes pragmatic considerations relevant to topicality. The obligation to set the boundary fairly lies not with the debaters, but with the topic committee, as explained above. Whereas pragmatic considerations may affect where the framers ought to set the boundary, semantic considerations determine where the already set boundary lies.<sup>10</sup>

More importantly, the parametric approach, as I have stated it, read about it, and heard it defended, is extremely unclear. It is not clear whether proponents

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<sup>9</sup>Some define the parametric approach as the view that the affirmative's plan "becomes" the resolution. That is not how I use the term here.

<sup>10</sup>Again, it may be ambiguous or vague where the boundary lies, and here pragmatic considerations may become relevant as tiebreakers, subject to a framework of reasonability or competing interpretations.

of this view think that the claim that the resolution is or sets a boundary is metaphorical or literal. If it's metaphorical, then what is it a metaphor *for*? If it's literal, then what is the resolution a boundary *on*? The resolution is a sentence. And we do not usually take sentences to be boundaries. In what follows, I'll try to clarify the parametric view and see whether it can justify the pragmatic approach to topicality.

## 2.1 Sets of Worlds

There is an influential approach in the philosophy of language that may shed some light on the parametric view. This approach understands propositions—i.e., the things expressed by sentences, such as the resolution—to be sets of possible worlds. A possible world is a complete way things could be or could have been. Things could have been such that I have red hair, that the bullet missed JFK, that there was no life on earth, etc. You have a possible world when you've specified, for each way things might be, whether things are that way or not. The view that propositions are sets of possible worlds takes, for example, the proposition that the sky is blue to be the set of all possible worlds in which the sky is blue. This proposition is true because the actual world belongs to that set. The proposition that I have red hair is false because the actual world is not a member of the set of possible worlds in which I have red hair. We can think of the resolution as demarcating a region in the space of possible worlds: worlds within this region are, in the relevant sense, topical. Can the affirmative specify a smaller region within this topical region, and argue that the actual world lies within *this* region? On the conception of propositions as sets of possible worlds, this should be fine: if the actual world belongs to a subset of a set of possible worlds, then it belongs to the larger set as well. But there are three ways in which we must be careful not to be misled by this fact.

First, this does not imply that the affirmative may specify a set of just governments, for example, on the current resolution. Consider the set of worlds in which the U.S. and the UK ought to require that employers pay a living wage. Is this set a subset of the set of worlds in which just governments ought to require that employers pay a living wage? Only if “just governments” gets an existential reading, so that it means something like “some just governments,” and I have explained why this reading is semantically inadequate. The appeal to the resolution as a boundary makes this point no less relevant. The easiest way to see this is if the resolution said “*all* just governments.” (There have been LD and policy resolutions that included universal quantifiers.) Many possible

worlds in which the U.S. and the UK ought to require that employers pay a living wage are not elements of the proposition that all just governments ought to require that employers pay a living wage. So the right to specify a subset of the resolution does not, *independently of the resolution's semantics*, justify specification of any part of the resolution. On my view, a topical advocacy text is just one that entails the resolution.<sup>11</sup> The parametric approach (as currently understood) is not only consistent with my view; it *supports* it: if propositions are sets of possible worlds, then a subset of the resolution is just a proposition that entails the resolution. That is just how subsets work, and it is unavoidable if one takes the resolution to be a set of possible worlds.

A second way in which we might be misled is by allowing the affirmative to narrow down their set of possible worlds in ways that are not mentioned by the resolution: for example, a world in which just governments ought to require that employers pay a living wage *and all the kangaroos are free*. This is extra-topicality, which can be addressed as follows. If the additional clauses are outside the scope of the “ought,” then they have to show that the actual world satisfies those clauses. If the additional clauses are inside the scope of the “ought,” then they have to show that the smaller set of worlds is really a subset of the resolution, which depends on the logic of “ought.” Many philosophers reject that “S ought to do A and B” entails “X ought to do A” and “X ought to do B” (Jackson and Pargetter 1986), so the set of extra-topical worlds may not be a subset of the set of topical worlds.

A third way in which we might be misled is by assuming that *if* the affirmative may specify a subset of the resolution (understood as a set of possible worlds),

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<sup>11</sup>Bob Overing has argued that this view doesn't work for all resolutions. He gives an example from 1993–94 in NDT: “Resolved: That the Commander-in-Chief power of the President of the United States should be substantially curtailed.” Bob says that a plan to significantly curtail the President's power to deploy armed forces would not be topical on my view. This is because it could be true that this plan should be implemented but also that every other Commander-in-Chief power should be augmented. In that world, it would not be true that the President's Commander-in-Chief power should be substantially curtailed. There are several ways of accounting for this resolution. One can read “curtailed” as an episodic, dynamic verb that merely requires a single act of curtailment, rather than a state in which the power is curtailed overall. Affirmatives could also advocate curtailing the power in one significant way and not augmenting it in many other significant ways: this would entail the resolution even on a stative reading of “curtailed,” but make some permutations of augmentation counterplans count as severance. Moreover, one of the contrasts between the Commander-in-Chief topic and the more recent war powers topic is that the former is ridiculously broad: teams ran cases about topics ranging from the President's medical staff and wartime media coverage to nuclear first-strike policy and particular status-quo court decisions. That my view makes it unclear whether the aff can propose curtailments on just one aspect of the President's Commander-in-Chief power is not a major cost: indeed, it has the virtue of explaining why this resolution from 20 years ago is worse than more recent college policy resolutions. Bob gives no other examples of policy resolutions that are not entailed by clearly permissible plans. And even if there are, my point here is that the parametric approach may not do any better than my own view.

then the debate should focus on the smaller subset rather than the resolution—i.e., that the affirmative’s chosen set of worlds cannot “grow” after its initial advocacy. This question about the rules for debate is completely independent of the whether the affirmative may specify a subset of the resolution in the first place, which I see as a question of logic and semantics.

My tentative conclusion is that understanding the resolution as a parameter that forms a set of possible worlds does not support specification when at odds with resolutorial semantics. This is because the set of worlds included in the resolution depends on the meaning of the sentence—i.e., on semantic considerations—and because topical subsets of worlds are simply propositions that entail the resolution.

## 2.2 Sets of Examples

Perhaps I have misunderstood the parametric approach, by taking the resolution to be a boundary on the wrong sorts of objects. Let’s consider a different version of the parametric view. On this view, the resolution is a boundary on a set of *examples*. More specifically, these examples are agent-action pairs—e.g., the U.S. doing something, the UK doing something, etc., where “something” is a way in which that agent could require employers to pay a living wage. The affirmative may pick an example within that set as their advocacy, and the question of topicality is just which examples belong in the set.

There is a problem with this view, however. It presupposes what I earlier called the *existential* interpretation of the topic. If the resolution said (or meant), “Some just governments ought to . . . ,” then it would be clearly permissible, if not obligatory, for the affirmative to specify a particular just government. But if the resolution’s “just governments” is instead a generic, then it’s unclear why it should be legitimate for the affirmative to specify a particular government. To see why this is suspicious, suppose that the resolution stated, “All just governments ought to . . . .” I hope everyone would agree that one couldn’t affirm by specifying a single government or even a few governments, *even if those are examples of just governments requiring employers to pay a living wage*. This is because universal generalizations are not affirmed by a single witnessing instance. Nor would it be persuasive to suggest that although the resolution is worded as a universal or generic generalization, we should ignore that feature because it is undesirable for debate. The same goes for generic generalizations. So it should be no more legitimate for the affirmative to specify a particular example on a generic resolution than it is on a universal one. At the very least, this is a

reason why the version of the parametric approach under consideration cannot be applied to resolutions regardless of their wording: the resolution's semantics comes first.

Moreover, debaters who adopt this version of the parametric approach have the burden to show that their specified agent is, indeed, a just government. This follows straightforwardly from the existential interpretation of the resolution, as I explained in my previous article: "Some  $X$ s ought to  $\phi$ " presupposes that there are  $X$ s, and substituting  $A$  and  $B$  as the instances of  $X$ s presupposes that they are indeed  $X$ s. Affirmatives often respond that the resolution merely means that *if* some to-be-specified government were just, then it would require that employers pay a living wage. They compare the resolution to a sentence like, "Good students ought to do their homework." But this response is available only if the generic interpretation is correct. That is easy to see because the analogy supporting the argument is obviously generic. More theoretically, as many linguists have noted (Greenberg 2003, 14), generics support counterfactuals in ways that existential and universal generalizations do not. For example, consider these three statements:

**Existential:** Some good debaters have G2 pens.

**Universal:** Every good debater in this room has a G2 pen.

**Generic:** Good debaters are quick on their feet.

The existential generalization does not support the counterfactual that if one were a good debater, then one would have a G2 pen. Assuming that every good debater in the room just *happens* to own a G2 pen (i.e., that owning a G2 pen is not an entrance requirement to some strange party), the universal generalization does not support the counterfactual that if one were a good debater and in the room, one would have a G2 pen. But the generic generalization *does* support the counterfactual that if one were a good debater, then one would be quick on one's feet. The general lesson is that the counterfactual reading of the resolution in response to "no just governments" is only available if the generic interpretation is correct; it is not available on the existential interpretation, which is presupposed by (this version of) the parametric approach. Specifying a particular agent and refusing to show that it is a just government, therefore, fails to affirm.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>It merely affirms a proposition supported by the resolution. But the affirmative's burden is to affirm the resolution, not to affirm a different proposition that the resolution supports. The latter burden would be absurdly easy to meet, because every resolution entails infinitely many trivial consequences.

The affirmative cannot consistently have her parametrized cake and eat it too. Moreover, everyone realizes that the resolution supports the counterfactual in question, which means that we all know that the generic interpretation is correct, regardless of whether we'd like to admit it. And if the generic interpretation is correct, then it makes no more sense to affirm by specifying a particular example than it would if the resolution were worded as a *universal* generalization—that is, no sense at all.

I have considered two versions of the parametric view. The first, which takes the resolution to be a set of possible worlds, is consistent with my view and does not justify specification when at odds with resolutorial semantics. The second, which takes the resolution to be a set of examples, understood as agent-action pairs, presupposes an existential interpretation that must be semantically justified and is inconsistently defended. Perhaps there is a different way of making good on the parametric approach that does not run into these problems. But I am not confident that the view can be made sufficiently clear, precise, and applicable to the diversity of resolutions we encounter in LD to justify the weight that it is often supposed to bear, both in justifying the use of plans and the relevance of pragmatic considerations to topicality.

### 3 Debate as an Autonomous Context

Some might object to my claim that pragmatic considerations are irrelevant to what the resolution means. On this view, all pragmatic considerations (when suitably impacted) are semantic considerations. The meaning of the resolution is at least partly a function of which interpretations of it are conducive to fair and educational debate. This view might be defended by appealing to unique context of a debate round.

Lots of words are ambiguous. They have multiple senses. For example, “bat” is ambiguous between the animal and the thing used to hit baseballs. You can discover this ambiguity by consulting a dictionary. We determine the meaning of a given utterance of “bat” by looking at other features of the context.

Some expressions acquire new meanings in technical contexts. This is a common argument for the use of definitions from specialists in an academic field. But Kupferbreg (1987) argues that competitive academic debate is its own context. So the meaning of a term when used in a resolution for competitive debate may diverge from how it used in ordinary contexts and used by specialists in

the topic's academic field. Appropriateness for the debate context depends on factors related to fairness and education. So pragmatic considerations may have semantic implications for interpreting debate resolutions.

Is Kupferbreg right that debate is its own autonomous context? This is a big question. Some assume that debate should be modeled on external activities in the real world, such as policymaking. Others argue that debate is a game with its own standards of success that need not be modeled on anything else. These views are not very precise, as stated. But we can make them clearer by focusing on the ballot's question, "Who did the better debating?" Some believe that the standards for good debating are standards that we can straightforwardly apply from other contexts. Others believe that standards for good debating emerge from debate itself. I think the answer must be somewhere in the middle. Standards for good debating have to come from *somewhere* other than competitive academic debate, because debating exists outside of competitive academic debate. The components of good debating, including argumentation, communication, and strategy, have their own standards outside of this bubble. But competitive academic debate combines these components in a way that may result in a somewhat different set of standards. LD is not a simulation of or a training ground for any other specific activity beyond debate, such as law or philosophy. Nor is it an autonomous end-in-itself. Debate is a game, but the game is designed to test and reward certain skills that have purchase outside of the game itself. Analyzing the meaning of a text may be one such skill, and debaters can develop it via a semantic approach to topicality. Changing the topic by appealing to wish lists and hyperboles about ground loss is not such a skill.

But even if Kupferbreg is right that debate is its own context, it does not follow that conduciveness to good debate determines what the resolution means. Kupferbreg appeals to the consensus of linguists that words can be ambiguous. That is obvious. But linguists require *evidence* of ambiguity before they accept that a word is ambiguous. That is why they posit empirical tests of ambiguity (Zwicky and Sadock 1975). Many linguists and philosophers of language are guided by the maxim, "Avoid multiplying senses beyond necessity." A debater appealing to the technical context of debate would need empirical evidence that the expression has a debate-specific, technical meaning. Without this evidence, we should assume that the words in the resolution are used in their ordinary senses (or, in certain obvious cases, in the technical sense of some academic field). Moreover, it is unlikely that NSDA LD topic committee would use words in unconventional ways that could only be understood by application of debate-specific standards—especially standards that are used by a tiny minority of

LD debaters, in the grand scheme of things.<sup>13</sup> I don't want to put too much weight on what the topic committee thinks, because I have no idea what they think, and different members probably think different things about resolutional interpretation. My point is just that the ambiguity hypothesis is, without much further evidence, just a hypothesis, and that it is *prima facie* unlikely that resolutions are written not in ordinary English but rather in some technical dialect of English which the vast majority of debaters and coaches (i.e., those who primarily compete on local circuits) do not speak.

I acknowledge that what may seem to be merely pragmatic considerations can have semantic implications. For example, if some proposition is obviously true or obviously false, or has no normative implications, then that proposition is almost certainly not what the resolution means, given what we know about LD. It is unlikely that anyone would propose or vote for such a resolution with that proposition in mind as its meaning. Similarly, if some interpretation would allow or require the affirmative to specify any pair of local or national governments, or a particular government whose name is not mentioned in the resolution, then you can bet that it is not what the resolution means. But such pragmatic considerations are merely *evidence* for the underlying semantic considerations, and they assume auxiliary premises about resolutional semantics. There is no magical construction of meanings by completely debate-specific standards.

## 4 Conclusion

I have argued that resolutional interpretation should be determined primarily by semantic considerations—i.e., considerations that bear on the meaning of the sentence. This is because debaters should debate the resolution, and the resolution's meaning is independent of what debaters want it to mean. This commonsense view is independently plausible and is less vulnerable to critiques of topicality than the pragmatic approach, which blurs the distinction between topicality and theory.

The priority of resolutional semantics is not, I have argued, undermined by the conception of the resolution as a parameter or boundary. This conception, when clarified in obvious ways, either supports my view when applied to the topicality of plans or cannot reasonably be applied independently of semantic considerations. Nor is my view undermined by the unique context of debate. For

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<sup>13</sup>For an interesting parallel to this claim in the theory of constitutional interpretation, see Christopher Eisgruber, "Should Constitutional Judges Be Philosophers?" in Hershovitz (2008).

even if debate is a unique context, there is no decisive evidence that resolutions use words in technical ways with debate-specific meanings.

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