

A new 'normal'

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In a recent piece, Jon Bebb (2023) has argued that we have no reason to believe, contrary to what is often assumed, that 'normal' is ambiguous between a statistical and a normative sense. I argue that his case rests on two false premisses, and that we have very good reasons to believe that 'normal' is, in fact, ambiguous in this way. As part of my argument, I will go on to suggest that if 'normal' is ambiguous between a statistical and a normative sense, that is because of the deep but seldom recognised connection between regularities and rules. This suggestion, if correct, will in turn help us elucidate three familiar thoughts about normality.

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1. *'Normal'*

'Normal' is standardly assumed to be ambiguous between a *statistical* sense which contrasts with 'uncommon' or 'unusual', and a *normative* sense which contrasts with 'problematic' or 'defective'. But in a recent piece, Jon Bebb (2023) has argued that we have no reason to believe that 'normal' is ambiguous in this way. I will argue, in reply, that his argument rests on two false premisses. If I am right, we will be left not only with a strong case for the standard view, but also with an explanation as to why 'normal' may denote properties as different as the ordinary and the alright. This same explanation will in turn help us shed light on three familiar thoughts about normality.

2. *Bebb's Case*

Ambiguities – Bebb reminds us – should be postulated only when doing so is strictly necessary (see also Grice 1989). Yet very little has thus far been said in favour of thinking that 'normal' must indeed be ambiguous between 'ordinary' and 'alright'. And so – he continues – the standard view is undermotivated.

But how do we tell whether we really need to ascribe more than one meaning to a word 'w'? One way of checking is with the so-called conjunction-reduction test (Zwicky and Sadock 1975). This test consists in forcing what we take to be 'w's' different meanings onto a single instance of 'w'. If the result sounds zeugmatic, that word *passes* the test, and must consequently be ambiguous between the tested meanings. To illustrate:

(1) # Alba owns a baseball bat, and Cassie owns a chiropteran; they both own a bat.²

Here, 'bat' is made to bear what we take to be its two meanings: *the instrument* and *the animal*. And, since (1) sounds zeugmatic, 'bat' passes the test, and is thus ambiguous in this way.

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² Adapted from Moldovan (2021:233).

Now, the problem for the standard view – Bebb argues – is that ‘normal’ would seem to *fail* this test. This, at least, is what he concludes after considering:

(2) Brian drives a four-wheeled car and Diane never exceeds the speed limit; they are both normal drivers. (Bebb 2023: 657).

Here, Bebb argues, it would seem that we are combining the two purported meanings of ‘normal’. Specifically, he argues that, in Brian’s case, ‘normal driver’ is naturally read as ‘ordinary driver’, while, in Diane’s case, it cannot but be interpreted as ‘alright driver’.³ We are thus combining ‘normal’’s statistical and normative meanings. Yet, Bebb claims, (2) does not sound zeugmatic. Therefore the test gives us no reason to believe that ‘normal’ is ambiguous.

This, if right, would constitute an important setback for the standard view, but it would not yet show it to be false. This is because, as Bebb rightly notes, some ambiguous words are known to fail the test. Compare:

(3) Lunch was delicious, but took forever. (Asher 2011: 11).

This sentence does not sound zeugmatic, and yet ‘lunch’ clearly bears two different meanings here. In the first sense, ‘lunch’ refers to *the food*; in the second sense to *the event*. So, one might ask, couldn’t ‘normal’ simply be a term like ‘lunch’: a term whose ambiguity is undetectable to the test? Bebb leaves this open, but notes a difficulty.

It has been observed that a necessary condition for an ambiguous word to fail the test is for it to be *regularly polysemic* between the tested meanings (see, e.g., Falkum and Vicente 2015). A word ‘w’ is regularly polysemic between two meanings m_1 and m_2 iff (i) m_1 and m_2 are related, and (ii) there is at least another term ‘t’ which is ambiguous in that same way (Apresjan 1974). ‘Lunch’, for example, is a regular polyseme: it is ambiguous between clearly related meanings, *the food* and *the event*, and there are other words – e.g., ‘breakfast’, ‘supper’, ‘dinner’... – which are ambiguous in that same way. And so ‘lunch’ meets this necessary condition for undetectability.⁴

The problem, Bebb argues, is that ‘normal’ does not seem to be a regular polyseme, for there do not seem to be other words which are ambiguous between a statistical and a normative sense. We therefore have no reason to believe that ‘normal’’s received ambiguity could be undetectable. So, in short, if ‘normal’ were ambiguous between ‘ordinary’ and ‘alright’, the test should detect it. But because—Bebb claims—the test *doesn’t*, we have no reason to believe that ‘normal’ really is ambiguous in this way, and so no reason to accept the standard view.

3. Two Premisses

Bebb’s case rests on two, crucial premisses: first, that ‘normal’ fails the conjunction-reduction test, and, secondly, that ‘normal’ is not regularly polysemic with respect to its two received meanings. Both, I will argue, are false. This will leave us with two independent cases for the standard view.

³ Diane, official data tells us, is in fact *not* an ordinary driver in the UK (Bebb 2023: 657).

⁴ I haste to add that being a regular polyseme is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for undetectability: as we will see, it is possible for a word to be both a regular polyseme *and* pass the test.

4. The First Premiss

Bebb claims that (2) is non-zeugmatic, and so that ‘normal’ fails the conjunction-reduction test. But the exact opposite seems true to me. That is, because (2) strikes me as zeugmatic, this example seems to me to indicate that ‘normal’ *passes* the test. To substantiate this claim, consider a small variation on (2), namely:

(4) ? Brian and Diane are both normal drivers: she never exceeds the speed limit and he owns a four-wheeled car.

Here it seems to me even clearer that the result is zeugmatic. I suspect that this is because, as we start reading (4), ‘she never exceeds the speed limit’ initially invites interpreting ‘normal drivers’ in a normative sense. But this reading then clashes with ‘he owns a four wheeled car’, which immediately follows, and instead imposes a statistical reading. And, crucially, ‘normal drivers’ cannot simultaneously bear both. But suppose that (4) fails to convince. Here is another example.

Take two ways of reasoning, one common, but incorrect, e.g., denying the antecedent, and one correct, but uncommon, e.g., proving by cases.⁵ Both ways of reasoning are, in a sense, normal. Denying the antecedent is a normal way of reasoning, but only in that it is common; it is not a normal way of reasoning if, by that, we mean that reasoning in this way is alright. The opposite, by contrast, is true of proving by cases, which is uncommon and yet correct reasoning. Now, consider:

(5) ? Denying the antecedent and proving by cases are both normal ways of reasoning.

This sentence requires, as explained, that we read ‘normal’ in different ways for the two subjects. Crucially, (5) strikes me as clearly zeugmatic.

And the sense of zeugmaticity is even stronger if we take a variation on (5) where ‘normal ways of reasoning’ is placed in subject position:

(6) ?? Normal ways of reasoning include proving by cases and denying the antecedent.

The reason why (6) sounds strongly zeugmatic – as in (4) – is that, as we read it, ‘proving by cases’ initially invites us to interpret ‘normal’ in its normative sense. But this reading immediately clashes with ‘denying the antecedent’, which instead requires that ‘normal’ be read statistically. Importantly, if I am right in thinking that (4), (5), and (6) do sound zeugmatic, it would mean that, *pace* Bebb, ‘normal’ passes the test, and so that the test supports the standard view.

Now, while all of these examples sound to me clearly zeugmatic, one might nonetheless still insist that, to them, they don’t. Unfortunately, there is not much I can do here to convince one that they really should. Disagreements over zeugmaticity judgments are hard to solve, and looking at additional cases does not always help us come to a clear and shared verdict (Sennet 2023). Therefore, and so as to move beyond this impasse, I suggest that we turn to the second premiss. In what follows, I will argue that it is also false, since ‘normal’ is, plausibly, a regular polyseme. This will crucially provide us with test-independent evidence for its received ambiguity, and it will also indirectly reinforce my observation that ‘normal’ passes the test. I will explain how later on.

⁵ If you do not think that proving by cases – i.e., disjunction elimination – is an uncommon way of reasoning, you can use another valid rule of reasoning you take to be rare in everyday thinking, e.g., the constructive dilemma.

5. The Second Premiss

Bebb claims that 'normal' is unlikely to be a regular polyseme because no other word seems to be ambiguous in the same way. But this is false: 'normal's received ambiguity marks other terms too. One of them is 'regular'. If, for example, I were to say 'This is not a regular financial operation', my assertion would seem to be ambiguous between two interpretations: (a) that said financial operation is not common, or (b) that said financial operation is in violation of some standard. 'Regular' thus seems to be marked by the same ambiguity exhibited by 'normal'.

'Standard' is also plausibly ambiguous in the same way, as evidenced by 'standard procedure', which might refer to (a) the *usual* procedure, or (b) to a procedure which accords with a certain kind of *rule*. Ironically, note that 'rule' – like 'norm' – is ambiguous in this very same way. If I say, 'That is the rule here', I am roughly saying that this is the way things *usually* go, but if I say 'These are the rules here', I am talking about the way things *ought to go*.⁶ So there seem to be other words, in addition to 'normal', that are ambiguous between a statistical and a normative sense.

Does this mean that 'normal' is regularly polysemic between its received meanings? Not yet. Recall that for a word 'w' to be regularly polysemic between m_1 and m_2 , not only must other words be ambiguous in the same way: m_1 and m_2 must also be related. Compare: 'newspaper' 'magazine', and 'journal' are all ambiguous between the same, related meanings: the *product* ('I read the newspaper/magazine/...'), and the *producer* ('I phoned the newspaper/magazine/...'). Here we see a recurring ambiguity between related meanings, and so we have regular polysemy.

But what about 'normal', 'regular', 'standard' and so on? So far, I have argued that they are all plausibly ambiguous between a statistical a normative sense, but I have not yet said how those meanings are *related*. To make progress on this point, I suggest that we look at the word 'law'. 'Law', we are about to see, is also plausibly ambiguous between a statistical and a normative sense, and its ambiguity proves instructive, for it indicates that the ambiguity observed thus far arises from the deep but seldom recognised connection between *regularities* and *rules*.

6. Rules, Regularities, and Patterns

G. H. von Wright (1963: 2) writes that although 'the laws of nature and the laws of the state are very different [...] the identity of name is no pure coincidence'.

His reasoning is that the former are *descriptions* of regularities (e.g., at noon, the tide falls), and the latter are *prescriptions* on behaviour, i.e., rules (e.g., at the red light, stop the vehicle!). Now, because the laws of nature are descriptions, when one of them is falsified by an exception, it is not the world that ought to be changed, but our own description of the world. By contrast, because the laws of the state are prescriptions, when one is broken, it is not the prescription itself that must be changed: it is the action that violates it which must be rectified or sanctioned. According to von Wright, this is the distinction between laws of nature and laws of the state.

But, one might ask, why would 'law' be ambiguous between related meanings on this view? Unfortunately, von Wright does not say, and it is unclear why, exactly, 'description of regularities' and 'prescription' – i.e., 'rule' – should be related senses of 'law'. Yet I believe that we can readily modify von Wright's proposal in a way that makes the answer to this question clear and plausible. If we think of laws of nature not as *descriptions* of regularities, but as the regularities *themselves*,

⁶ For clarity, I will henceforth use 'rule' and 'ought' in their normative sense only: that of *obligation*.

the ambiguity in ‘law’ becomes, simply, the ambiguity between ‘regularity’ and ‘rule.’⁷ This, note, does not yet explain why these two meanings of ‘law’ are related, but it puts us on the right track.

My suggestion is that ‘regularity’ and ‘rule’ are related meanings of ‘law’ because regularities and rules are both *kinds of pattern*. Regularities are patterns that *are* or *tend to be* followed, and from which deviations would thus be unusual or uncommon – for example: at noon, the tide falls. Rules, by contrast, are patterns that *ought* to be followed: they are patterns from which deviations are wrong, and ought to be corrected or sanctioned – for example: at the red light, stop the vehicle. This suggestion is faithful to von Wright’s original insight, for it preserves the sense in which the two senses of ‘law’, though very different, are related. Ultimately, however, it proves clearer.⁸ Furthermore, it can immediately explain the ambiguities observed thus far.

On this view, for example, if ‘norm’ is ambiguous between a statistical and a normative sense, that is because ‘norm’ – like ‘law’ – ambiguously refers to either (a) a regularity, i.e., a pattern that tends to be followed, or (b) a rule, i.e. a pattern that ought to be followed. Analogously, if ‘normal’ is ambiguous between ‘ordinary’ and ‘alright’, that is simply because it is ambiguous between, respectively, (a) ‘conforming to a regularity’, and (b) ‘conforming to a rule’. Compare: in saying that something is normal, we might be saying, roughly, that it conforms to some regularity, and so that it is common or ordinary, or that it conforms to some rule, and so that it is alright – i.e., as it ought to be. This, at least, is what I would like to suggest.

But is this suggestion correct? Reflection about cases suggests so. Affirming the consequent, for example, is in a sense a normal way of reasoning because by reasoning in this way one conforms to a pattern that people *tend to follow*: that of inferring, from q, and p implies q, that p. But, in another sense, affirming the consequent is *not* a normal way of reasoning: to reason in this way it is to deviate from a pattern one *ought to follow* when one reasons. Similarly, burning the red light might be deemed normal in that doing so conforms to a pattern that tends to be followed.⁹ But, in another familiar sense, burning the red light is *not* normal, for doing so is to deviate from a pattern one ought to follow when one drives: at the red light, stop the car.

Similar thoughts apply to ‘regular’, ‘standard’, and so on. In saying, of a procedure, that it is not a standard or regular procedure, I might be saying (a) that said procedure deviates from a pattern that *tends* to be followed, and so that it is uncommon, or instead (b) that it deviates from a pattern that *ought* to be followed, and so that it is not alright. If this is right, ‘normal’, ‘regular’ and ‘standard’ are all ambiguous between the same related meanings, and so ‘normal’ is regularly polysemic between ‘ordinary’ and ‘alright’.¹⁰ This constitutes a strong case for the standard view. And, crucially, this case is independent of the conjunction-reduction test, for it only rests on the observation of a recurring and principled ambiguity between ‘normal’’s received meanings.

⁷ This proposal also sits better with the thought that laws of nature are the *regularities themselves*, rather than our descriptions of those regularities. Nonetheless, I should note that the view according to which the laws of nature are regularities is controversial. Some, for example, hold that they are not *just* regularities, but physical necessities. My proposal, however, does not ultimately rest on who is right here. I simply wish to note that a certain conception of laws of nature can help us shed light on the linguistic ambiguity observed so far.

⁸ This is, in part, because my proposal does not make use of the notions of description or prescription, which may give rise to misunderstandings. For example, the aforementioned conceptions of laws of nature as regularities or as physical necessities are sometimes respectively called ‘descriptive’ and ‘prescriptive views’ (cf. Swartz 2024). But von Wright uses ‘descriptive’ and ‘prescriptive’ to mark another distinction – the one between *assertions* and *commands*, and, more broadly, that between what *is* the case and what *ought* to be the case.

⁹ Imagine here that burning the red light is very common in this or that place.

¹⁰ Also note that regular polysemes tend to be cross-linguistically robust, and this prediction is confirmed: ‘rule’, ‘norm’, ‘normal’ etc. are not only ambiguous in English, but also in French, German, Greek, and Italian.

7. Combining Cases

I have argued that ‘normal’ passes the conjunction-reduction test, and that it is regularly polysemic between its two received meanings. We thus possess two cases for the standard view. Now, some might worry that this is not a consistent combination. That is, one might wonder, how can ‘normal’ pass the test if, as just argued, it is regularly polysemic between the tested meanings? To start answering this question, note that nothing in what precedes precludes this possibility.

Earlier I wrote that a *necessary condition* for an ambiguous word to fail the test is for it to be regularly polysemic between the tested meanings. So, if an ambiguous word fails the test, then it must be regularly polysemic between the tested meanings. This claim crucially does not entail that a word cannot be regularly polysemic and pass the test. Another, different claim entails this, the following one: being regularly polysemic between the tested meanings is a *sufficient condition* for an ambiguous word to fail the test. That is, if a word is regularly polysemic between m_1 and m_2 , then, when those meanings are combined, the result will be non-zeugmatic.

Now, if said sufficiency claim were right, there *would be* an inconsistency in my reply, for if ‘normal’ is indeed regularly polysemic between its received meanings, then it should fail the test. But the sufficiency claim is false. It has been observed that some regular polysemes *pass* the test. We have already seen one: ‘newspaper’. When we combine its two meanings, product and producer, the result is zeugmatic:

(7) # The newspaper fell off the table and fired its editor. (Gillon 2004: 177)

It is thus perfectly possible for a word to be regularly polysemic and pass the test. And so there is no inconsistency in the joint denial of Bebb’s two premisses.

In fact, their joint denial helps us reinforce my earlier claim that ‘normal’ passes the test. Let me explain. We have seen that some regular polysemes, e.g., ‘lunch’, fail the test (3), while other regular polysemes, e.g., ‘newspaper’ pass it (7). This has led some to distinguish two types of regular polysemes: *inherent polysemes*, whose meanings combine non-zeugmatically, and which the test thus *cannot* detect, e.g., ‘lunch’, and *merely regular polysemes*, whose meanings combine zeugmatically, and which the test thus *can* detect, e.g. ‘newspaper’ (see esp. Pustejovsky 1995). Here we reach a pivotal point.

It is to be expected that if ‘lunch’ is an inherent polyseme, and thus fails the test, then other words which are ambiguous between food and event will *fail* the test too. This is what we find:

(8) Breakfast (dinner, supper...) was delicious, but took forever.

Analogously, if ‘newspaper’ is a merely regular polyseme, and thus passes the test, other words which are ambiguous between product and producer should also *pass* it. This is also what we find:

(9) # The magazine (# journal) fell off the table and fired its editor.

In short, uniformity with respect to the test’s results is to be expected within the same instance of regular polysemy.¹¹ This brings me to my final argument.

¹¹ Just why some cases of regular polysemy fail the test while others don’t is a matter of debate. For discussion, see Pustejovsky (1995), Ortega Andrés and Vicente (2015) and Liu (2023). See also Viebahn (2022).

If I am right in thinking that ‘normal’ is regularly polysemic, and that it passes the test, then we should expect that ‘regular’ and ‘standard’ will pass the test too. This is exactly what we find:

(10) # Eddie followed the usual procedure, but Farah followed the correct procedure; they both followed the regular (# standard) procedure.

This confirmed prediction reinforces my suggestion that ‘normal’, ‘regular’, and ‘standard’ are all regular polysemes, for we get uniform results from the test. This also suggests that they are merely regular polysemes, for the test can detect their ambiguity. This, in turn, supports my earlier claim that ‘normal’ – which is part of this instance of regular polysemy – *passes* the test.

We thus possess two independent and mutually reinforcing cases for the standard view. Moreover, each of them alone is sufficient to establish it. That is, if ‘normal’ passes the test, but I am mistaken in thinking that it is a regular polyseme, the standard view nonetheless still follows.¹² And if ‘normal’ does *not* pass the test, but it is indeed a regular polyseme, then ‘normal’ would be an inherent polyseme, and the standard view would also follow.¹³ Thus one must reject both my arguments to resist the standard view. For now, we have good reasons to accept it.

8. Back to Normal

I have argued that ‘normal’ is ambiguous between a statistical and a normative sense, and that its ambiguity can be explained by reference to the deep but seldom recognised connection between regularities and rules. Importantly, this take on ‘normal’ can now help us elucidate three familiar thoughts about normality.

The first is that to be normal in one sense is not necessarily to be normal in the other: in short, the ordinary and the alright can come apart. On my view, this is explained by the fact that to conform to a regularity is not necessarily to conform to a rule, and vice versa. After all, patterns that tend to be followed are not necessarily patterns that ought to be followed – and vice versa.

The second thought is that we are often too quick in taking things that are abnormal in the statistical sense to be therefore abnormal in the normative sense too. Why? A natural suggestion given my proposal is that we are often too quick in taking deviations from a regularity to be deviations from a rule, and so to conflate the uncommon and the defective.

The third is that being normal, in the normative sense, is often not sufficient to be good: being a normal person is often not sufficient to be a *good* person. This is unsurprising. To be normal in the normative sense is to conform to a rule, and conforming to a rule is rarely sufficient to be good. As J. J. Thomson (2008: 231) writes: “He did what he ought” is very rarely high praise.¹⁴

¹² Passing the test – recall – is sufficient to show that a word is ambiguous.

¹³ If so, however, we should expect – recall – that ‘regular’ and ‘standard’ fail the test too.

¹⁴ I would like to thank Jon Bebb, Francesco Chiesa, Julien Deonna, Giulia Felappi, Conor McHugh, Fabrice Teroni, and two anonymous referees for their comments on earlier versions of this piece.

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