

ACCOMMODATION, INFERENCE, GENERICS AND PEJORATIVES

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My aim: To give an account of norms governing our uses of *generics*, and our *inferring*, showing how phenomena of *accommodation* can help explain the behaviour of generic judgements and pejorative uses of expressions. ¶ This is a part of a collaborative research project *Constructing Social Hierarchy*, exploring anti-individualist approaches to mind, language and action, aiming to understand how we construct and maintain social hierarchies, so that we can better remedy social injustice. ¶ The team: Sally Haslanger, Karen Jones, Laura Schroeter, François Schroeter, and me.

1 MOTIVATION & BACKGROUND

PROBLEM 1 GENERICS e.g. Birds lay eggs * Logic talks are boring * Mosquitos transmit Ross River Fever (RRF) * Cows are food * Men are aggressive * Muslims are terrorists

Generic judgements, of the form Fs are Gs, are *pervasive*, are *basic* and behave *very strangely*.

What do generic judgements *mean*? What does it mean to say mosquitos transmit RRF? ¶ **All** mosquitos transmit RRF — some don't. ¶ **Some** mosquitos transmit RRF — true, but some mosquitos *don't*, and we don't also say “mosquitos *don't* transmit RRF.” ¶ **Most** mosquitos transmit RRF — Most don't. ¶ **Normal** mosquitos transmit RRF — Male mosquitos don't. They aren't normal? Also, mosquitos from outside Oceania don't carry RRF. ¶ Mosquitos **are the kind of thing that** transmit RRF. — They're also the kind of thing that doesn't—e.g. males, or those in Africa.

BACKGROUND 1: “INFERENTIALISM,” BROADLY CONSTRUED *Inferentialism*: an approach to semantics that takes meaning to centre on *norms of inference* [1, 2].f ¶ *Normative Pragmatics*: an approach to semantics that takes semantics to centre on *norms of use* (perhaps including inference, perhaps not) [6, 8, 12]. ¶ My recent research concentrates on the connections between *normative pragmatics* and logic, via *proof theory* [15, 16].

PEJORATIVES An inferentialist analysis of pejorative predicates:

$\frac{x \text{ is Caucasian}}{x \text{ is Pākehā}}$	$\frac{x \text{ is Pākehā}}{x \text{ is untrustworthy}}$
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Using *Pākehā* in this way encodes a substantial connection between being Caucasian, and being untrustworthy. ¶ What does *Pākehā* mean, when it's used like this? ¶ This isn't restricted to pejorative expressions. People can use *standard* expressions pejoratively, too.

$\frac{x \text{ is a talk on proof theory}}{x \text{ is a logic talk}}$	$\frac{x \text{ is a logic talk}}{x \text{ is boring}}$
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Are these inferences a part of the *meaning* of the pejorative expression?

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BACKGROUND 2: SEMANTICS, METASEMANTICS & PRACTICE *Semantics*: accounts of the meanings of particular expressions. ¶ *Metasemantics*: an account of the space of possible meanings, and the different *ways* expressions can get their meanings. ¶ *Practice*: Metasemantics, in particular, can be a partner for *clarificatory* and *emancipatory* possibilities for revising our *languages* and *practices*.

2 GENERICS & INFERENCE

TRUTH CONDITIONS? There are *many* accounts of the truth conditions of the generic Ks are F. Any adequate account is *very complicated* [10, page 43].

Though there may be a further refinement or two needed, we can describe the circumstances under which a generic of the form ‘Ks are F’ is true as follows:

- The counterinstances are negative, and:
 - If F lies along a characteristic dimension for the Ks, then some Ks are F, unless K is an artifact or social kind, in which case F is the function or purpose of the kind K;
 - If F is striking, then some Ks are F and the others are disposed to be F;
 - Otherwise, almost all Ks are F.

There is something right about these accounts, though it is very hard to see how it gives the correct truth conditions for generics like **tall people with back injuries find it difficult to drive small cars**. Many generics generalise on *complex* terms.¹

THE APPROACH I'LL EXPLORE We don't *understand* a generic by first grasping its truth conditions. We learn to use generics by learning norms for how to *use* them. ¶ I take it that this sort of account makes sense of how we understand modal terms like *possibly* and *necessarily*. “Possibly p” and “Necessarily p” have truth conditions expressed in terms of *possible worlds*, but we don't learn the concepts of possibility and necessity by way of some prior access to possible worlds [16].

“To say that a state of affairs obtains is just to say that something is the case; to say that something is a possible state of affairs is just to say that something could be the case; and to say that something is the case ‘in’ a possible state of affairs is just to say that the thing in question would necessarily be the case if that state of affairs obtained, i.e. if something else were the case... We understand ‘truth in states of affairs’ because we understand ‘necessarily’; not *vice versa*.” — Arthur Prior [14].

INFERRING IS AN ACTION Consider the difference: Tweety is a bird. Tweety flies. ¶ Tweety is a bird. *So*, Tweety flies. ¶ There is a dif-

¹I think it follows from this that the connection between the use of generics and the propensity to essentialise categories is quite subtle, and worth more reflection [4, 5, 11]. Notice that the analysis of generics given here is completely orthogonal to the question of whether generics in any way essentialise. The questions become: whether and when—and how—do inference and explanation essentialise?

difference in the common ground. If the inference is made explicit by a *generic*, this can do the job.

CONSEQUENCES This commitment (Fs are Gs) goes beyond the explicit subject matter (the object *a*) under discussion. ¶ Since generics are *generic*, they can persist, even after the details fade from attention. ¶ We can find ourselves accepting generics (and *believing* them) without ever having explicitly considered them.

4 THE SEMANTICS OF PEJORATIVES

PEJORATIVE INFERENCE PAIRS Consider the inference pairs characteristic of pejorative expressions and pejorative uses of expressions:

x is Caucasian	x is <i>Pākehā</i>
x is <i>Pākehā</i>	x is untrustworthy
x is a talk on proof theory	x is a <i>logic</i> talk
x is a <i>logic</i> talk	x is boring

I make no claim about whether these inferences are somehow central to the meanings of the terms “*Pākehā*” or “*logic* talk”. ¶ Though it seems that someone who uses “*logic* talk” pejoratively can talk with someone who doesn’t without necessarily being at cross purposes.

PEJORATIVES AND GENERICS Pejoratives straightforwardly give rise to generics: Caucasians are *Pākehā*. * *Logic* talks are boring.

STRIKING PROPERTIES AND GENERICS Mosquitos transmit RRF. * *Logic* talks are boring. * Muslims are terrorists. ¶ These are hard to uproot, or to argue against. ¶ Responses like these — Not *all* mosquitos; Not *all* *logic* talks; Not *all* Muslims — aren’t enough to uproot or undercut them.

5 OPTIONS FOR CRITIQUE & REFORM

HOW TO DENY A GENERIC To reject or deny Fs are Gs, you need to undercut the inference from Fa to Ga and the practice of explaining Ga in terms of Fa.

In a controlled environment, we can undercut the generic by being more *specific*, by moving to explicitly stated quantifiers. ¶ Are *all* Fs Gs? Are *most*? How many? ¶ This can work, but it is hard to resist forming generic judgements. Syntactic discipline takes work.

When G is a striking property, it’s not enough to say that many or most Fs are not Gs. ¶ After all, most mosquitos *don’t* carry RRF. One way to undercut the inference from Fa to Ga is to institute a practice in which the question of whether something is G or not *doesn’t arise*.

When we *care* about the property G, we won’t want to revise the concept away. So another approach is to find an *alternate* explanation for Ga, other than Fa. ¶ If not all species or genus of mosquito carry RRF, then we could refine our generic to the more specific one, that Mosquitos of genus *Culex* carry RRF, while agreeing that mosquitos outside that genus *don’t* carry RRF. ¶ Explanations of this shape might undercut the generic Muslims are terrorists, by replacing them with better explanations—such as research showing that domestic violence is a much stronger predictor of involvement in terrorism and mass killing [13].

In any case, denying a generic requires changing not only our explicit *theory*, but our dispositions to *infer*. ¶ These dispositions are expressed not just in the claims we make. They are revealed in how we string those claims together.

THE UPSHOT The strange behaviour of generic judgements can be explained by their grounding in our inferential and explanatory practice. This helps us understand the difficulties and some of the possibilities for reforming and revising those practices and the views they represent.

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