

Slippery Generics and the Key Schema

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Abstract

In ‘Language and Race’, Luvell Anderson, Sally Haslanger, and Rae Langton highlight a slip of ambiguous expression exhibited by racial generics that harbor bad faith arguments, reduces social contingencies to racial essences, and masks oppression.¹ They locate two psycholinguistic slips between classes of generics which communicate their use; one is between the characteristic generic and striking property generic and the other is between the characteristic generic and majority generic. I postulate three additional slips between classes of generics and speaker beliefs; one between the characteristic generic and the normative generic, another between normative generics and a speaker’s belief set, and another slip from a speaker’s belief set to a striking property generic. Together, the slips between generic classes constitute both a reception theory of the meaning of subject S’s utterance and the generic belief (re)generation process that structures the passage an assertion takes from a singular definite belief to a reinforcing normative generic inference in a minimal structure I name the key schema.

Introduction

Generics are generalizations that have a marked ability to admit exceptions. Generalizations contain inferences concerning their particular extensions. Generic terms have weak evidential demands and require few instances to establish associations regardless of their truth or falsity. These features make propositions expressed in generics difficult to cancel.² The danger of generics is in their essentializing power over everyday speech norms.³ Social essentialism is the belief that a particular social kind exists independently, and that social kinds are marked by shared stereotypical properties.⁴ Like slurs, generics are loaded with background beliefs concerning their meaning and use. Racial generics are a class of social kind generics that demand normative behavior in deference of a dominant racial narrative that reduces people to subordinate races or mere generic identities which are interchangeable with any other member of the group.⁵ I claim that this *racial fungibility* is a particularly damaging aspect of the *confusive* effects of generics.

Slips are psycholinguistic shifts in meaning that are still in contact with their reference if and only if they accidentally refer to something else. That is, slips stand for something else that what they purport to ascertain but represent it anyways. For our purposes, slips occur between classes of generic predicated on the reception of their signifiers. One way of explaining the phenomenon is the ambiguous reference to an extension and the swift shift of attention from one potential target to the next. The easy passage between ‘that’ and ‘thing’ when gesturing towards a generic object out of reach. (Ex. ‘I’m talking about that thing. No, *that!* No, *that thing.*’) Each utterance of ‘that’, ‘thing’, and ‘that thing’ refer to the same object in the world but the surface form of the communication does not specify *what it is* or *how it is distinct* from objects around it. However, the only description available to the receiver are the terms used to refer with the same form of ‘that thing’. It is left to the companion in retrieval to receive the salient object from view, which will at some level be found to be both ‘that thing’ and not ‘that thing’. Demonstratives are subject to their own issues⁶, in the previous illustration fail to refer but nonetheless reduce an entity to its reference as ‘*that*’, similar to how generic terms reduce a person to a fungible, tokenized *generic* identity.

¹ Anderson, L.; Haslanger, S. & Langton, R. (2012).

² Rosola, M., & Cella, F. (2020); Cimpian, A., Brandone, A. C., & Gelman, S. A. (2010).

³ Cella, F. (2017), p. 143.

⁴ Cella, F. (2017), p. 143.

⁵ Kukla, R. (2018), p. 19.

⁶ For a more in depth treatment of generic demonstratives, see Bowdle, B. F., & Ward, G. (1995). Generic demonstratives.

Sara-Jane Leslie divides generics into at least four classes which will be useful for our purposes: characteristic generics, majority generics, striking property generics, and normative generics⁷. I will paraphrase the relevant concepts as given by Anderson, Haslanger, and Langton (2012), although Leslie's account is far more detailed.

Characteristic generics such as "Ducks lay eggs" obtain because they assert a feature of the term in the subject position that is ostensive to *that* kind. That is to say, a feature that points to and indicates membership of a class of objects.

Majority generics such as "Pants have pockets" obtain because they assert a statistical claim that many pants have pockets in virtue of the feature's frequency among members of the kind *actually* indicated by the generic term.⁸ The propositions expressed in majority generics obtain even if there are instances of the kind that lack said feature, as long as there are no 'positive' counterexamples - instances of the kind with a feature that "overwrite" the majority generic feature.⁹

Striking property generics such as "snakes are venomous" assert a feature that is harmful, dangerous, or salient enough to affect subjectivity. For Leslie, simply being a member of the kind predicates the ascription of the feature to the kind, however, it is neither a characteristic of the kind nor do its instances comprise a statistical majority.¹⁰

Normative generics such as "boys don't cry" assert ideal properties exemplary of the kind in the subject position. This class of generics involve specifying a kind's primary performative function or social rule/role success conditions. Normative generics belong to a larger class of generics known as non-descriptive generics so named due to their flexible predicate that operates like a rule structuring the moves of a game. Additionally, the ostensive members of a normative generic that lack the feature that is predicated by their group membership is sorted as 'bad', 'defective', or not functioning according to the role associated with the norm enforced by the generic.

Characteristic, striking property, and normative generic claims share a surface form generalized to the proposition 'G's are fs.' This one contingency preconfigures our generalizations and interface with categories which are already themselves contingent. In tandem with generic's exemplary feature of exception-tolerance, I am of the mind of Rachel Sterken (2015) who makes the argument for genericity eliminativism and denies any content that is distinctly generic.¹¹ There does not seem to be any clear and distinct generic outside bounded context. So, I will situate my investigations on what constitute slips of intentions to the reception of expressions as impressions of relative difference, or more succinctly, affects.

The possibility of polysemic interpretation enabled by cognitive 'shortcuts' is a partial contributor to the durability and proliferation of generic claims. A shortcut is a compromise of rivaling demand of which a cognitive-affective analysis is a felicitous model. I suggest a closer examination of the path of least resistance a subject S may take to obscure their commitment to the policing of racial generics and the masking of oppression. I have identified five entry points to the circuit of generic belief generation process by which pernicious beliefs are able to escalate their scope and inject their associated propositions into the common ground of discourse. By following the process and sublimations of each moment in racial discourse, we can name the problem that result from these slips.

⁷ See Leslie, S.-J. (2015).

⁸ I have been informed, much to the dismay of many, not enough pants have pockets.

⁹ Leslie offers a psychological basis for the assignment of positive and negative status to features largely motivated by context.

¹⁰ Leslie, S.-J. (2008), p. 41.

¹¹ Sterken, R. K. (2015). Generics in context

Five Slips of Generic Reception

I shall proceed to link the four generic classes and the notion of belief outlined above to their respective consequents. The key schema is composed of two parts; a parallel circuit between characteristic and majority classes of generics and a series circuit consisting of the notion of belief, striking property, characteristic, and normative classes of generics.

The majority-characteristic slip lends a veneer of metaphysical and mathematical credence to generics that arise from the confusion of the expressions. The mentioned ‘confusive’ effects is aptly literal; it is the collision and fusion of two senses that derive from the same form, ‘Gs are fs.’ The following example **M↔C** adapted from Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson (2012) describes a common situation of a speaker S who utters a racial statement and then slides the elucidation of meaning of their utterance between expressing a majority generic claim or characteristic generic claim in a way that appears to agree with their interlocutor L. However, the speaker still maintains the implication of their racial generic assertion engaging in bad faith argumentation. The resultant loop is not unlike a parallel circuit in both redundancy and resistance to resistance.

M↔C

S: ‘Gs are fs.’ (ambiguous generic)

L: ‘Not all Gs are fs. G, and G, are ¬fs.’

S: ‘Okay, but Gs tend to be fs.’ (Characteristic claim)

L: ‘Gs have no affinity towards being fs greater than any ¬Gs have towards being fs.’

S: ‘Okay, but most Gs are fs.’ (Majority claim)

...ad absurdum

There are at least two salient components to this interaction. One that the form of the statement ‘Gs are fs’ is shared by the characteristic generic and majority generic form. Another is how S’s statement is received by L which facilitates S’s utterance being accepted or denied to the common ground of discourse. Experimental research by Leslie and Gelman (2012), concludes that quantified statements like ‘some/most Gs are fs’ are remembered as generic assertions like ‘Gs are fs’.¹² ¹³This accounts for the over-attribution from striking property generic expressions to characteristic generic expressions. Because striking property generic claims and characteristic generic claims have the same form, the associations between them become entangled. While this may appear an efficient shortcut, it is one with fallacious and damaging results. Experimental evidence from Haslam *et al.* has concluded that “Members of highly essentialized social groups are more likely to have diminished social status and be subjected to prejudice” (2000) (Wodak; Leslie; Rhodes, 2015). This is only one of the many damaging effects of the over-attribution of essential properties to kinds.

¹² Leslie, S.-J., & Gelman, S. A. (2012). Quantified statements are recalled as generics: Evidence from preschool children and adults

¹³ Cimpian, A., Brandone, A. C., & Gelman, S. A. (2010). Generic statements require little evidence for acceptance but have powerful implications.

How do we come to believe essentialist ideas? Wodak and Leslie (2017) claim it originates with our the nature of *them*. ‘*They*’ are an exception to *us* and *they* are distinct in virtue of a relation (or lack thereof) to a property *f*. In Wodak and Leslie’s words, “[T]he use of generics about *us* communicates that *we* are an essentialized kind... and that *we* ought to instantiate the ideals of *our* kind (exposing individuals to a further pressure to conform to harmful stereotypes).”¹⁴ In a way, generics used to describe social kinds are not unlike slurs.

Rebecca Kukla’s interpretation of slurring terms positions slurs as interpellations or hails.¹⁵ Following Louis Althusser, interpellation involves a signifier *recognize* itself in its target, *constitute* its subjectivity, *demand* the target to recognize this recognition and for the target to *regard* themselves subject to the constitutive ideology cued by the signifier.¹⁶ Similar to slurs, generic terms essentialize contingent relations as the ‘raw material’ or natural kinds of a given ideology to greatly persistent and damaging effect.

Racial fungibility is a reflection of the pernicious use of generics that tokenize and interpellate another person. Since slurs function as hails and racial generics are like slurs, racial generics likewise have associated signals that communicate the rule through the exception. To use a racial generic is to assume the kind and features that it employs. A racial generic when wielded by a bigoted speaker or an ignorant speaker is speaking from a place of exception; ‘though the ‘common man’ cannot speak this way, I can as a wielder of hegemonic power’. Indeed, a generic is less a weapon and more a schematic for destruction. In other words, generics encode their own destructive and reproductive meaning along lines of a discourse of power.

It seems paradoxical to talk about *us* in terms of *not-them* and vice-versa, but it follows the logic of the wide exception-tolerance feature exemplary of generics. The status and relation to exceptions will be covered in a later paper. For now, we shall continue to the serial structure of the key schema

In the following example **Q⇒SP**, S’s preconfigured essentialized generic beliefs about a G (‘Gs are fs’) encounter a member of the group G with a striking property *f* that is distinct from the other features of G and marks G for having this feature in virtue of *f* reliably predicting G’s group membership AND S having the belief that ‘Gs are fs.’ In other words, what makes a striking property striking is the features relation to the set of prior background beliefs of S concerning features of G.

Q⇒SP

S: ‘Gs are fs.’

L: That is false. Many Gs are not fs and some ¬Gs are fs

S: Okay, but Gs are fs in a distinct, dangerous way unlike the way ¬Gs are fs.

There are two faulty assumptions present: one is that there is a descriptive *kind* that is substantiated by any member to that the label is applied and the other is that there is a *property* that marks that kind as such. The essentializing assumption assisted by the ease of sliding reference from a belief about a singular G to the observation of a property *f* in tandem with those beliefs that either fit with the prior beliefs or defy preset expectation.

This slip is where pernicious effects begin to accumulate; a kind is picked out via some assemblage of descriptors taken by S to be essential features *f* that signal G. The feature is elevated to a striking property and the “essentialized, unusual, aberrant actions on behalf of the few may be taken to characterize the group

¹⁴ Wodak, D., & Leslie, S-J., (2017), p. 285.

¹⁵ Kukla, R. (2018), p. 13.

¹⁶ Althusser, L. (1970), p. 40. “As a first formulation I shall say: all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.”

as a whole” (Wodak and Leslie, 2017, p. 285). Generic terms like these are “sticky” in that the meanings associated with their use are easy to take up by listeners though difficult to refute.¹⁷

Another example named **BASEBALL** makes this clear. A common situation for children is to be in the ‘wrong place at the wrong time.’ Setting the stage for **BASEBALL**, two children Zef and Psam are practicing their knuckleball back and forth in the alley of a neighborhood. Another child Zho had just walked out to join them. In a dramatic windmill throw to impress Zho, Zef’s aim was no longer in the realm of the alley or reason and his pitch missed Psam exactly the distance that would place the ball in a nearby neighbors living room in an attempt of becoming-imperceptible with the wall. Nearby neighbor bursts from the front door in a cavalcade of frenzy, bellowing towards Zef, Psam and Zho ‘you rambunctious kids broke my window!’

Details to note: only Zef threw the ball and only one person could reasonably throw a ball. However, the nearby neighbor overattributed the responsibility for his broken window on *all three children*; Zef and Psam, even though Psam did not throw the ball, and Zho even though he was simply outside. It does not take much imagination to see how this scenario extends to the over-attribution of beliefs onto kinds instantiated by their sufficiently distinct features.

Consider the following example **SP⇒C** where S’s assertion of a striking property is met with resistance, causing S to slide his claim to that of a characteristic generic:

SP⇒C

S: ‘Gs are fs’ (and this one is dangerous)

L: ‘Not all Gs are fs.’

S: ‘Okay, but just enough Gs are fs and being an f is just dangerous enough to infer *any* G could be an f!’

Studies from Leslie and Gelman (2012) conclude the over-attribution of properties to novel kinds allows the slip from the implication of a striking property generic proposition to give rise to a characteristic generic proposition. As both striking property generics and characteristic generics resemble one another in form (‘Gs are fs’), what is allowed in conversation is whatever the interlocuter L does not deny. Over-attribution of a striking property to a characteristic property is a primary process of how racial generics come to overattribute and entrench reductive propositions in Leslie’s psychological account.

Another exchange between S and L may go like the example **C⇒N** where a characteristic generic of the kind is elevated to a normative generic.

C⇒N

S: ‘Gs are fs’

L: ‘No they aren’t, Gs are neither commonly f, strikingly f, nor characteristically f.’

S: ‘Okay, but Gs *should be* fs.’

Sally Haslanger in ‘The normal, the natural and the good: Generics and Ideology’, states “the idea of what’s normal may be statistical or normative: what tends to be or what ought to be” (2014: 22). **C⇒N** is precisely representative of how perceived generic defaults become encoded as normative rules and social roles which are ascribed in the common ground of discourse at the scale of a society.

¹⁷ Anderson, L., Haslanger, S., & Langton, R., (2012), p. 20; Cimpian *et al*, (2010).

The next slip from normative generic position to the reproduction and deposit of belief marks the end and the beginning of the series circuit of the key schema. Belief is either enacted, taught, or affirmed, but it cannot be denied. A feature of essentialist beliefs that lend to their durability is their productivity and ease of transmission. A experimental study by Rhodes, Leslie and Tworek (2012) concluded that hearing normative generic language about a social category precipitated essentialist beliefs about that social category.¹⁸ In other words, use of normative generics structure the belief patterns of members of a community of speakers. This causes the shift noted by the example $N \Rightarrow Q$ below:

$N \Rightarrow Q$

S: 'Gs are fs'

L: 'Why are Gs fs?'

S: 'Because Gs *are* fs.'

The marked equivalence expression in S's response indicates an extralinguistic force beyond intonation reaffirming the normative category, castigating any G that does not perform the f role adequately as not representative of the kind. New language learners (like children) lack the language to take issue with affirming the norm, and instead integrate S's statement 'Gs are fs' into the common ground of discourse and worse, integrate such assumptions about kinds defined by their essence. The norm of belief is the belief in the norm.

Another tack the normative generic can take is reinforcing the speaker's belief even if challenged. An interlocutor may challenge their assertion directly, but a speaker determined to maintain their commitments to the propositions of generics may claim 'you may not agree but I believe some Gs are fs'. Such a claim produces a residue that may motivate others to 'try on' the claim because of the propensity for quantified generics to be recalled as generics as written about in Leslie and Gelman 2013 and elsewhere.

How do norms influence beliefs? As mentioned before, normative beliefs function like rules in a game. Normative rules and social roles structure what moves are possible and consequently the beliefs about what move are possible. Beliefs take the form of descriptions that over time obtain explanatory power. *Explanations themselves* shift from a characteristic class of information to a normative class, reifying the descriptions so used as their own justification.

Haslanger locates the locus of the problem in the entrenchment of "Essentialist and Normative Assumptions" in the common ground of discourse through stealthy accommodation of implications of essences and kinds.¹⁹ Leslie finds the problem in the usage of generics themselves. I claim that generics allow us to name the problem, so their usefulness cannot be discounted. Further, repressing their use will only reinforce the libidinal forces that maintain the logic of racial generics in motion. However, the profuse number of essentializing assumptions remain lodged within social consciousness must be excised. I propose a solution for unlocking our bound rationality through an understanding of the key schema.

¹⁸ Rhodes, M., Leslie, S.-J., & Tworek, C. M. (2012). Cultural transmission of social essentialism.

¹⁹ Haslanger, S. (2014), p. 17.

The Key Schema

Putting our examples of $Q \Rightarrow SP$, $SP \Rightarrow C$, $C \Rightarrow N$, $N \Rightarrow Q$, and $M \Leftrightarrow C$ together, we have a structure of slips henceforth named the key schema shown in Fig. 1. The key schema is a model of the circuitry of argument along which racial generic discourse follows composed of the following elements: **M** is the majority claim; **C** is the characteristic claim; **N** is the normative claim; **Q** is the notion of belief in a claim; and **SP** is the striking property. An agents subjective position is propelled along these slips, stopping only long enough to shake out undesirable exceptions that threaten their generic classifications.

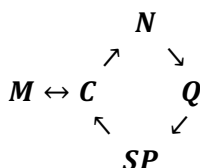


Fig. 1

A feature of this structure is the social “looping” effects (Haslanger 2014). In her own words, “[W]hat’s statistically normal is taken to be evidence of how things are by nature,” and hence an inevitability to be accommodated; and how things are by nature is taken to be how things “ought to be,” and thereby legitimated and socially enforced (Haslanger 2014: 22). In other words, the previously mentioned essentializing and normative effects edify and reproduce themselves, reified into sociocultural ideals backed by ideological and repressive state apparatuses²⁰. As active agents in the world equipped with words that can change the world, we are compelled to strategically dismantle the lazy generalizations that permit the continued epistemic injustice of social kind generics.

Explication of the Key Schema

How words are used depends on how they are received by the speaker. For this reason, I shall analyze both the assertion and the interpretation of its associated slippery implication. Consider the following statements, where ‘X’ is a derogatory generic term used to refer to a group targeted in virtue of their group membership; the asterisk [*] marking an inflationary force:

- [A] X is deserving of contempt.
- [B] X’s are deserving of contempt.
- [B*] X’s *are deserving* of contempt.
- [C] Most X’s are deserving of contempt.
- [C*] ALL X’s are deserving of contempt.

Q or the notion of belief is the assertion of [A] and the implication of [B]

SP or the striking property claim is the assertion of [B] and the implication of [A]

C or the characteristic claim is the assertion of [B] and the implication of [C*]

M or the majority claim is the assertion [C] and the implication of [B]

N or the normative claim is the assertion of [B] and the implication of [B*]

²⁰ Althusser, L. (1970) p. 2. “It follows that, in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce. It must therefore reproduce: 1. the productive forces, 2. the existing relations of production.”

Mapping these equivalencies on the key schema, we arrive at Fig. 2.

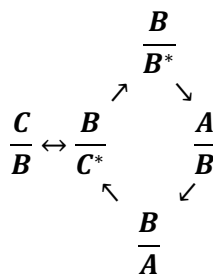


Fig. 2

Analysis of Fig. 2

While one may enter the circuit of racial generic discourse at any gate, I will begin with the appearance of the notion of belief, which is inherited from our environment. As mentioned before by Cimpian *et al.* (2010) and Leslie and Gelman (2012), normative claims produce a set of beliefs containing an assertion about an individual G but imply a claim about the class of Gs picked out by that kind. The striking property position is the inverse of the notion of belief, when leads to its prima facie un-believability that structures the saliency of the striking property. From here, we see the characteristic position inflates the implication of the striking property to the position of a universal while maintaining the surface assertion. The contingency of the characteristic position is signified by the possibility of a move to a majority position or a move to the normative position. The majority-characteristic position operates like a parallel circuit, recharging assumptions that are weakened by changing norms. Once a threshold of difference is surpassed, the circuit continues along the serial path to the normative position. The normative states the generic belief but with power. Power, following the path of least resistance, completes the circuit by producing a set of beliefs. The set of beliefs reach the disempowered first via force or the threat of force sustained by the belief of the singular ‘G is an f’, which is supported by the underlying presupposition that ‘Gs are fs’.

Objections

One problem for the key schema is the $SP \Rightarrow C$ slip or the *problem of over-extension*. A study by Lazaridou-Chatzigoga, Katsos and Stockall (2019) found that children and adults were less likely to extend striking property generics to novel instances of the kind. However, the experiment may have revealed another element for further inquiry. Noted in their ‘General Discussion’ was the fact that their experimental method involved *images* for representing the striking properties of fictional kinds while previous studies were conducted via *text* with participants reading sentences.²¹ I purport that *representation* plays a major role in the explanation of the apparent reversal Lazaridou-Chatzigoga *et al.* (2019) observed of the trend first seen by Cimpian *et al.* (2010) and others. Representation of social kinds and their internal exceptions may interrupt the encoding of fungibility into racial generics.

Another problem for the key schema is the $Q \Rightarrow SP$ slip or the *casual bigot problem*. A speaker’s beliefs may not necessarily judge a feature to the level of saliency required to be striking. For example, S may assert ‘Gs are hs’, but if Gs could be an f and S believes Gs *could be an f but isn’t an f now*, then the belief may fail to escalate to a striking property.

²¹ Lazaridou-Chatzigoga, D., Katsos, N., & Stockall, L. (2019). Generalizing about striking properties: Do glippets love to play with fire?

Future Directions

A synthesis of the contrary findings of Lazadirou-Chatzigoga et al. (2019) and Cimpian et al (2012) invites at least two questions:

1. What is the effect of *representation of difference prior to exposure to generics* on forming beliefs about extensions of striking properties?
2. What is the effect of the *degree of explicit mention of 'danger'* to operationalize striking properties and their uptake?

Conclusion

I have outlined the five points of intersection between classes of generics that form an overall structure of generic belief generation in a model I call the key schema. I have given a cursory treatment to the associated assertions and implications that compose each class of generic. I have mentioned two objections to the key schema, the problem of over-extension and the problem of the casual bigot. I conclude that the notion of representation can work to interrupt the narrative maintained by racial generics. While more work is to be done tracking the possible effects of representation of novel kinds on the uptake of generics, I think the key schema is a valuable development in portraying how a speaker's belief set is intricately connected to their relation to generics and will open doors to a world with fewer categories.

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