Accommodation, Inference, Generics & Pejoratives

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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.

The Wider Setting

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, me.*

Motivation & Background

Generics & Inference

Accommodation & Inference

The Semantics of Pejoratives

Options for Critique & Reform

MOTIVATION & BACKGROUND

Birds lay eggs.

Birds lay eggs.

Logic talks are boring.

Birds lay eggs.

Logic talks are boring.

Mosquitos transmit Ross River Fever.

Birds lay eggs.

Logic talks are boring.

Mosquitos transmit Ross River Fever.

Cows are food.

Birds lay eggs.

Logic talks are boring.

Mosquitos transmit Ross River Fever.

Cows are food.

Men are aggressive.

Birds lay eggs.

Logic talks are boring.

Mosquitos transmit Ross River Fever.

Cows are food.

Men are aggressive.

Muslims are terrorists.

Fs are Gs

Fs are Gs

... are *pervasive*.

Fs are Gs

... are *pervasive*.
... are *basic*.

Fs are Gs

… are *pervasive*.

… are *basic*.

… behave *very strangely*.

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

All ~~mosquitos transmit RRF.~~

Some don't.

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don't.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don't.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

True, but some mosquitos *don't*, and we won't say "Mosquitos *don't* transmit RRF."

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don't.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

True, but some mosquitos *don't,* and we won't say "Mosquitos *don't* transmit RRF."

Most mosquitos transmit RRF.

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don't.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

True, but some mosquitos *don't,* and we won't say "Mosquitos *don't* transmit RRF."

Most mosquitos transmit RRF.

Most don't.

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don't.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

True, but some mosquitos *don't,* and we won't say "Mosquitos *don't* transmit RRF."

Most mosquitos transmit RRF.

Most don't.

Normal mosquitos transmit RRF.

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don't.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

True, but some mosquitos *don't*, and we won't 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?

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don't.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

True, but some mosquitos *don't*, and we won't 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?

Mosquitos ***are the kind of thing that*** transmit RRF.

All mosquitos transmit RRF.

Some don't.

Some mosquitos transmit RRF.

True, but some mosquitos *don't*, and we won't 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?

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.

▸ INFERENTIALISM: an approach to semantics that takes meaning to centre on *norms of inference*.

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▸ NORMATIVE PRAGMATICS: an approach to semantics that takes semantics to centre on *norms of use* (perhaps including inference, perhaps not).

▸ My recent research concentrates on the connections between *normative pragmatics* and logic, via *proof theory*.

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$$\frac{x \text{ is German}}{x \text{ is } \textit{Boche}}$$

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Using *Boche* in this way encodes a substantial
connection between being German,
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Using *Boche* in this way encodes a substantial
connection between being German,
and being cruel.

What does *Boche* mean, when it's used like this?

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People can use *standard* expressions pejoratively, too.

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Are these inferences a part of the *meaning*
of the pejorative expression?

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- 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 our *practices*.

GENERICS & INFERENCE

There are *many* accounts of
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Ks are F

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Ks are F

Any adequate account is *very* complicated.

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.

Sarah-Jane Leslie "Generics: Cognition and Acquisition," *Philosophical Review* 117:1 (2008), 1–47 — page 43.

We don't *understand* a generic by
first grasping its truth conditions.

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We learn to use generics by learning
norms for how to *use* them.

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"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.

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,
Worlds, Times and Selves (1969)

The problem remains:

What are the norms governing generics?

How do we understand them?

Let's change tack for a moment.

Inferring is an action

Consider the difference:

Consider the difference:

Tweety is a bird. Tweety flies.

Consider the difference:

Tweety is a bird. Tweety flies.

Tweety is a bird. *So*, Tweety flies.

Consider the difference:

Tweety is a bird. Tweety flies.

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There is a difference between making two assertions, and making one assertion to *give a reason* for another.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

ABELARD: Does Tweety fly?
ELOISE: Yes, she's a bird.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

ABELARD: Does Tweety fly?
ELOISE: Yes, she's a bird.

This is beef. So, this is food.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

ABELARD: Does Tweety fly?
ELOISE: Yes, she's a bird.

This is beef. So, this is food.

ABELARD: Is this food?
ELOISE: Yes, it's beef.

ABELARD: Does she have stripes?
ELOISE: Yes, she's a zebra.

ABELARD: Does she have stripes?
ELOISE: Yes, she's a zebra.

ABELARD: Is she a zebra?
ELOISE: Yes, she has stripes.

ABELARD: Does she have stripes?
ELOISE: Yes, she's a zebra.

ABELARD: Is she a zebra?
ELOISE: Yes, she has stripes.

Each direction can make sense,
given an appropriate context.

ELOISE: She has stripes.
ABELARD: Why?
ELOISE: She's a zebra.

ELOISE: She has stripes.
ABELARD: Why?
ELOISE: She's a zebra.

ELOISE: She's a zebra.
ABELARD: Why?
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ABELARD: Why?
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ELOISE: She's a zebra.
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ELOISE: She has stripes.

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- These are *speech acts*, like *assertion*.

  (I can *infer* B *from* A despite believing B *before* believing A. Inferring, in this sense, isn't *believing on the basis of.* The same goes for explaining or justifying.)

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  (I can *infer* B *from* A despite believing B *before* believing A. Inferring, in this sense, isn't *believing on the basis of*. The same goes for explaining or justifying.)

- Making an inference is also not to be identified with offering a deductively valid argument, or taking yourself to do so.

Reason giving is *defeasible*, or *non-monotonic*:

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

Reason giving is *defeasible*, or *non-monotonic*:

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

Tweety is a bird. *Tweety is a penguin*. ~~So, Tweety flies~~.

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how our claims relate to one another?

Why not just care about whether A and B are true,
and ignore whether A is *a reason* for B?

(Or, why do children ask *why* instead of just asking *whether*?)

Why attempt to keep track of how claims relate to one
another?

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY   THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

Two reasons for having practices of inferring and explaining

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

If we find a zebra...

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

If we find a zebra...

THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

Is this a zebra?

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

If we find a zebra...

Suppose that *had been* a zebra

THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

Is this a zebra?

Two reasons for having practices of inferring and explaining

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY	THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY
If we find a zebra...	Is this a zebra?
Suppose that *had been* a zebra	Suppose that's *actually* a zebra

Two reasons for having practices of inferring and explaining

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

If we find a zebra...

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Options for action

THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

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Suppose that's *actually* a zebra

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If we find a zebra...

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Options for action

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Options for belief

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THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

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Options for belief

Indicative

Two reasons for having practices of inferring and explaining

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

If we find a zebra...

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Options for action

Subjunctive

"*Metaphysical*"

THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

Is this a zebra?

Suppose that's *actually* a zebra

Options for belief

Indicative

Two reasons for having practices of inferring and explaining

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY	THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY
If we find a zebra...	Is this a zebra?
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Options for action	Options for belief
Subjunctive	Indicative
"Metaphysical"	*"Epistemic"*

Two reasons for having practices of inferring and explaining

PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY	THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY
If we find a zebra...	Is this a zebra?
Suppose that *had been* a zebra	Suppose that's *actually* a zebra
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Subjunctive	Indicative
"Metaphysical"	*"Epistemic"*

It is hard to see how we could *act*
on the basis of *shared views* without
some kind of reason-giving practice.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.

She's a zebra. So, she has stripes.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.

She's a zebra. So, she has stripes.

— Zebras have stripes.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.

She's a zebra. So, she has stripes.

— Zebras have stripes.

She has stripes. So, she's a zebra.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.

She's a zebra. So, she has stripes.

— Zebras have stripes.

She has stripes. So, she's a zebra.

— Striped things are zebras.

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

— Birds fly.

She's a zebra. So, she has stripes.

— Zebras have stripes.

She has stripes. So, she's a zebra.

— Striped things are zebras.

— Striped horses are zebras.

I can *make explicit* my preparedness
to infer Gx from Fx
by saying

Fs are Gs.

I can *make explicit* my preparedness
to infer Gx from Fx
or to *explain* Gx by way of Fx
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  - **Tweety is a bird** is a good reason for **Tweety flies**, even if this does not apply to all birds.

This explains many of the distinctive features of generics

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  ‣ **Does Tweety lay eggs?** Yes, **Tweety is a bird.** (Good!)
    Is Tweety female? Yes, **Tweety is a bird.** (????)

    Or, **Tweety lays eggs** since **Tweety is a bird.** (Good!)
    Tweety is female since **Tweety is a bird.** (???)

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  ‣ Given that reason giving *does* admit exceptions, in the case of striking/dangerous properties, it is much better to err on the side of *false positives* than *false negatives*.

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‣ *Low rate generics with striking properties*: **Mosquitos transmit RRF.**
  ‣ Given that reason giving *does* admit exceptions, in the case of striking/dangerous properties, it is much better to err on the side of *false positives* than *false negatives*. At the very least, we are happy to explain **This transmits RRF** by granting **this is a mosquito.**

We can infer from any A to any B.

Why are generics, of the form Fs are Gs, so prevalent?

We can infer from any A to any B.

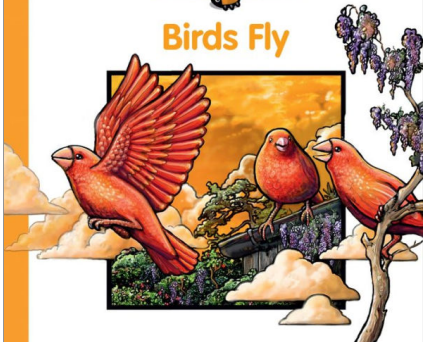Why are generics, of the form Fs are Gs, so prevalent?

In dialogue or in planning,
the *focus* of inquiry is often fixed.

So, inferences of the from suitable for explication
by a generic (from Fx to Gx) are widespread.
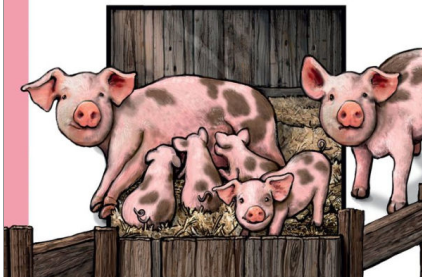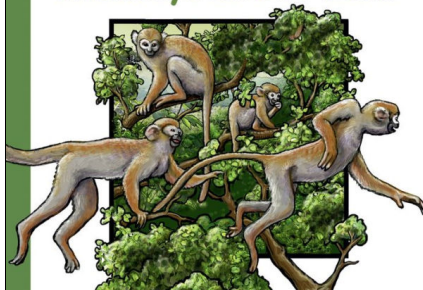
Why make inference explicit?

To teach …

To teach ...

... and to *refine*.
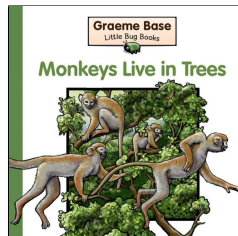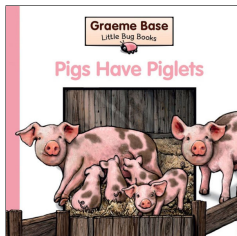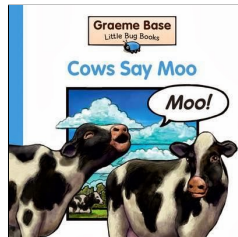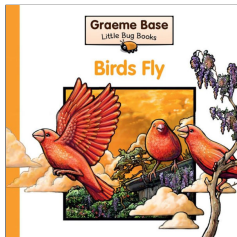
We communicate and
coordinate on inferences:
if you've learned that birds fly,
you'll accept "x is a bird"
as a reason to conclude "x flies,"
or to explain "x flies"
by appeal to "x is a bird."

The information conveyed can be local.

Consider a zoo enclosure with a range of horse-like creatures: I might say "striped ones are zebras".

You can object to my inference

Fa. So, Ga.

in three different (related) ways:

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(1) Deny Fa.   (2) Deny Ga.   (3) Deny the *So*.

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We have words for (1) and (2).

How do you voice objection (3)?

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Fa. So, Ga.

in three different (related) ways:

(1) Deny Fa.   (2) Deny Ga.   (3) Deny the *So*.

We have words for (1) and (2).

How do you voice objection (3)?

Making inferences explicit
gives us a way to argue about them.

What is it to *deny* that birds fly?

What is it to *deny* that birds fly?

Birds *don't* fly?

What is it to *deny* that birds fly?

Birds *don't* fly?

Fs are *non*-Gs   *not* (Fs are Gs)

The grammar of generics makes denying them difficult.

We often move to more explicit quantification:
many birds don't fly, or *not all birds fly.*

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Neither does it make much of a claim at all, by itself.

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We'll return to this topic later.

ACCOMMODATION & INFERENCE

The COMMON GROUND of a conversation at any given time is the set of propositions that the participants in that conversation at that time mutually assume to be taken for granted and not subject to (further) discussion.

— Kai von Fintel
"What is Presupposition Accommodation, Again?"
Philosophical Perspectives, 2008.

When uttered assertively, sentences are meant to update the common ground. If a sentence is accepted by the participants, the proposition it expresses is added to the common ground.

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If there are drinks after the seminar, my son will come.

When I say this, the proposition that I have a son
(and perhaps that I have only one son)
is added to the common ground.

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This phenomenon is called *presupposition accommodation*.

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This phenomenon is called *presupposition accommodation*.

(The details of *how*—and *which*—presuppositions are
accommodated is a matter of debate and active research.)

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Sometimes we find ourselves committed to substantial claims
we never explicitly considered. We have *accommodated* them.

If you make the inference
Fa, *therefore* Ga,

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and you meet with no objection,

If you make the inference
$F\alpha$, *therefore* $G\alpha$,
and you meet with no objection,
then not only are $F\alpha$ and $G\alpha$
added to the common ground,

If you make the inference
Fa, *therefore* Ga,
and you meet with no objection,
then not only are Fa and Ga
added to the common ground,
but so is the generic: Fs are Gs.

This could be highly *local*.

Recall: *she has stripes*, so *she's a zebra*.

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Striped things (here) are zebras.

The speech act of inference is *explicit*.
It can be rejected, just as an assertion can.

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I can *reject* the inference Fa, so Ga,
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If the inference is made explicit by
a *generic* this can do the job.

‣ This commitment (Fs are Gs) goes beyond the explicit subject matter (the object α) under discussion.

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‣ Since generics are *generic*, they can persist, even after the details fade from attention.

‣ We can find ourselves accepting generics (and perhaps, *believing* them) without ever having explicitly considered them.

PEJORATIVES

$$\frac{x \text{ is German}}{x \text{ is } \textit{Boche}}$$

$$\frac{x \text{ is German}}{x \text{ is } \textit{Boche}} \qquad \frac{x \text{ is } \textit{Boche}}{x \text{ is cruel}}$$

$$\frac{x \text{ is German}}{x \text{ is } \textit{Boche}}$$

$$\frac{x \text{ is } \textit{Boche}}{x \text{ is cruel}}$$

$$\frac{x \text{ is a talk on proof theory}}{x \text{ is a } \textit{logic} \text{ talk}}$$

$$\frac{x \text{ is a } \textit{logic} \text{ talk}}{x \text{ is boring}}$$

I make no claim about whether these inferences
are somehow central to the meanings
of the terms "*Boche*" or "*logic* talk".

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are somehow central to the meanings
of the terms "*Boche*" 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 straightforwardly give rise to generics.

Germans are *Boche*.   *Logic* talks are boring.

Mosquitos transmit RRF.

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Muslims are terrorists.

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These are hard to uproot,
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Muslims are terrorists.

These are hard to uproot,
or to argue against.

Not *all* mosquitos.   Not *all* logic talks.   Not *all* Muslims.

OPTIONS FOR CRITIQUE & REFORM

‣ 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.

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    - Are *all* Fs Gs? Are *most*? How many?

‣ 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.

‣ 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.

▸ 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.

‣ 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.

‣ In any case, denying a generic requires changing not only our explicit *theory*, but our dispositions to *infer*.

‣ These dispositions is expressed not just in the claims we make. They are revealed in how we string those claims together.

The strange behaviour of generic judgements
can be explained by their grounding
in our inferential practice.

This helps us understand the difficulties
and some of the possibilities for
reforming and revising those practices
and the views they represent.

THANK YOU!

SLIDES: http://consequently.org/presentation/

FEEDBACK: @consequently on *Twitter*,

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