

Introduction to the Generic Special Issue

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‘Generics’—and ‘generic reference’—should be a key analytic for understanding the relation between language and the ‘social’. Generics ‘express general claims about kinds and categories’ (Leslie 2012; see also Lyons 1977; Krifka, Pelletier, Carlson, ter Meulen, Chierchia, & Link 1995; Gelman 2003; Leslie 2015). They are resources for talking about types of things, activities, and persons without reference to instantiations of those types as tokens. And they abound in everyday talk—think, for instance, of the broad-brush descriptions that circulate around US politics: ‘liberals don’t care about God’; ‘conservatives are heartless’.

In introducing, theorizing, and walking through cases of generic reference, the contributions that follow illuminate the role of abstraction in social and semiotic life. Gelman builds from her work on generics in cognitive psychology to reflect on what research on language as social action might offer scholars in her field, as she also suggests what cognitive psychology’s investigation of generics can offer in return. Sidnell examines fragments of Vietnamese conversation to show that generics ‘play a key role in the interactional articulation and, thus, the social circulation... of ideology’. In my contribution, I compare generics and specifics about gambling in Laos, arguing that these two referential strategies afford distinct kinds of social acts and force us to reckon with how we understand types and the terms that appear to stand in for them. McIntosh explores generic and specific uses of dehumanizing epithets among soldiers, uses which both enable abstraction about ‘the enemy’ and ‘sweep like a terrible net across a diverse human landscape, gathering people indiscriminately into the same abject type[s]’. And finally, Mannheim argues for the importance of generics as ‘cultural replicators’, which constrain and reproduce conventions for meaning making.

These contributions show what generic reference offers as an analytic. Each builds from work in philosophy and linguistics, where generics have been a subject for decades, and from more recent work in cognitive psychology by Gelman and others (e.g. Gelman 2003, 2010; Gelman & Legare 2011; Brandone, Cimpian, Leslie, & Gelman 2012; Gelman & Roberts 2017; DeJesus, Callanan, Solis, & Gelman 2019). In this understanding of generics, generic reference is not a property of lexemes but a kind of construal of the use of an utterance. The same lexeme (e.g. ‘mosquito’) can be used to make a generic or specific reference:

GENERIC: Mosquitoes carry malaria.

SPECIFIC: There are two mosquitoes on your leg.

‘Generic’ here thus differs from other common uses of the word in phrases such as ‘generic brands’ and ‘generic language’ (see Moore 2003; MacLochlainn 2015, 2019), as it also differs from uses of ‘generic’ in ethno-semantics, where the term designates ‘the level of the ordinary everyday names for things and creatures: *cat, oak, carnation, apple, car, church, cup, etc.*’, which tend to be ‘morphologically simple’ (Cruse 1986:146). Different ‘generic brand’ names such as ‘Natural Cola’ and generic nouns such as ‘cat’ can all be used both for specific and generic reference. As specifics, speakers would use them to talk about instantiations of types—for example, ‘Are you going to finish your Natural Cola?’—whereas as generics, they would use them to talk about the types themselves—for example, ‘Natural Cola is cheap’—apart from any particular token of those types.

Generics thus offer a way to nuance the study of reference. Over the last several decades, and after the decline of ethno-semantic work, many of those interested in language in society, and especially linguistic anthropologists, have focused most on forms of non-referential meaning (see Silverstein 1976). When they have investigated the social dimensions of reference, they have tended to study forms that refer to elements of the speech event, such as personal pronouns, spatial language, or indexically anchored characterizing utterances (Silverstein 1976; Hanks 1990; Agha 2007). They have shown that these ‘denotational deictics’ evince the sociality of language starkly, insofar as they can be used to refer to the social situation as interaction unfolds. But as scholars of language in society have stressed and unpacked the importance of such relatively concrete language, and developed analytics for describing it, they have paid less attention to the linguistic resources that speakers use to explicitly refer to the ‘nomic’ or the patently abstract (but see Silverstein 2003; Agha 2007; Mannheim, Gelman, Escalante, Huayhua, & Puma 2010; Koven 2016). Much as the notion of ‘the shifter’ has oriented research into denotational deixis, an analytic of generic reference might serve as a platform from which we can explore these latter issues.

In the rest of this introduction and in lieu of summarizing the subsequent contributions—which stand on their own—I sketch four topics that an analytic of generic reference implicates and clarifies for those who study language in society: (i) the role of essentialization and abstraction in our data and analyses; (ii) the extent to which these essentializations and abstractions are pragmatically embedded in the contexts in which they emerge; (iii) the relation between the capacity to refer generically and non-generic references to real or imagined things; and, finally, (iv) the role of ‘kinds’, ‘categories’, and ‘types’ in theories of language in society.

First, few studying language in society have delimited generics as a domain of inquiry. Nevertheless, generics suffuse most linguistic data and all scholars write generics in their own analyses. As Gelman suggests in her article in this issue, exploring these two domains—generics *qua* data and generics *qua* analysis—offers a vista for exploring the relation between local abstractions and scholarly ones.

Generics are appealing as data in part because they formally resemble the abstract perspective of academic discourse. As a result, without much effort, they

can be extracted from their semiotic webs of meaning and neatly incorporated (or recontextualized) into analyses (compare the notion of ‘texts’; Bauman & Briggs 1990; Urban & Silverstein 1996). One can quickly exemplify locals’ opinions on, say, the subject of ‘reading’, by quoting generics—‘Reading is very important’. Specific utterances such as, ‘Are you still reading? That’s good’, inevitably require more contextualization. In this way, generics thematically dovetail with our own work. There is perhaps no straighter path to ‘explicit ideology’ about social life than to ask consultants to reflect on the types, classifications, and kinds that make social life meaningful. ‘Are ‘white collar’ and ‘blue collar’ workers different?’ ‘How does buying and selling in the market work?’ Of course, different scholarly traditions—say, variationist sociolinguistics and Actor Network Theory—have radically different views on how ‘true’ or worthy of analysis the content of these generics are (see Gal & Irvine 2019:178 on this subject in research on language ideology). But no matter each tradition’s stance on these questions, all scholars are inevitably confronted with locally articulated generics as a kind of academic doppelganger, which parallel the generics we write in our own voices. Examples abound (see Clifford 1983:137). Take the first line in Sapir’s (1921) *Language* (‘Speech is so familiar a feature of daily life that we rarely pause to define it’) or the first line in Bloomfield’s (1933) book of the same title (‘Language plays a great part in our life’). Some authors report generic propositions about generic propositions, for example, the economic anthropologist who writes, the ‘Tiv say that it is “good” to trade food for brass rods, but that it is “bad” to trade brass rods for food’ (Bohannon 1959:497; see Agha 2017:324); others genericize concepts defined by their specificity, such as ‘experience’ and ‘practice’. In the social sciences, many have become rightfully wary of writing in the ‘ethnographic present’ (see Fabian 1983) or using ‘the’ before the names of ethnic groups (e.g. ‘the Lao’), but generics are a different sort of tick. Leaving them behind is almost impossible to imagine. It would leave us with little to say (see DeJesus et al. 2019). Continuing to explore how and why locals use generics in interaction offers us a vantage from which we can explore the consequences of this fact, and therefore better understand the utility of generics as data, as well as what generics do for us as analysts.

Second, studying generics makes clear that even as generic utterances can seem as abstract as their content, they are always pragmatically embedded in the scenes in which they are spoken, and thus shaped by and capable of shaping social life (Zuckerman 2020; see also Gal & Irvine 2019:181). As has been found with generically filled proverbs and aphorisms (Arewa & Dundes 1964), people utter generics not just to stand back and reflect on the world, but to do things. Parents use them to teach their children (Gelman 2003); Vietnamese friends use them to joke about whether men or women ‘suffer’ more (Sidnell, this issue); drill instructors use them with an eye toward inuring recruits to the moral complexities of killing ‘the enemy’ (McIntosh, this issue); and Lao civil servants use them to fashion themselves as respectable people who don’t ‘gamble for money’ (Zuckerman, this issue).

That such utterances would be motivated *in situ* is surely not news to readers of *Language in Society*. But generics provide an analytic focus to this idea, a climbing hold on the undifferentiated escarpment of ‘explicit discourse’. From this vantage, we can explore the terrain and make further distinctions. The payoffs are especially clear for understanding essentialization and generalization (Gelman 2003; McIntosh 2018). As several of the following contributions argue, generics are a site for transmitting, reproducing, and contesting broad visions of natural and cultural kinds. Studying generics helps us see the local motives for doing this work, allowing us to unpack why people essentialize and generalize in interaction IN THIS WAY rather than in other ways (e.g. McIntosh 2005).

Third, with generics as an analytic, we can investigate what generics afford the actors who utter them and how they are different from other tools and modes of essentialization. Specifying generics is a step toward moving beyond the coarse distinction between the explicit and implicit (Gal & Irvine 2019:176–82) toward a more subtle set of distinctions concerning how types are made relevant in practice. Simply put, generics open up questions for the study of comparative reference.

Are generics especially morally persuasive, authoritative, or normative (Orvell, Kross, & Gelman 2018), difficult to contest or refute? Do actors tend to use the same lexemes they use generically differently in specific reference? The answers to these questions will only come with good, comparative work, but the contributions that follow sketch what some of this work might look like. As my article in this collection shows, because generics and specifics differ in the extent to which they can be anchored to speech events, there is good reason to think speakers would use them quite differently, as the two kinds of reference afford different kinds of social action (see Sidnell, this volume, on language ideology). Certain lexemes also appear to lend themselves to generic or specific reference. For example, while ‘generic reference’ is NOT a class of words, some classes of words tend to be reflexively construed as inappropriate or unusual for specific reference. In a survey, Berlin, Breedlove, & Raven (1973:251) found, for instance, that words for the most inclusive taxons, such as ‘plant’ or ‘animal’, were ‘rarely named’, that is, used for specific reference. This raises obvious follow-ups: when are these words used specifically and to what effect? What other words lend themselves to particular kinds of reference? In her contribution, McIntosh disentangles a related problem by distinguishing ‘generic reference’ from ‘generic types’. The latter are figures such as ‘soldier’ or ‘enemy’ which appear unidimensional and lacking in specificity, even as they can be instantiated in specific persons by way of specific reference. As McIntosh recounts, citing Wierzbicka (1988:475), when epithets associated with ‘generic types’ are used specifically, the use is liable to be construed as if it were ‘on purpose.’ This makes clear that roughly understanding the semantics of a given lexeme—its hypernyms and hyponyms, synonyms, and antonyms—allows us to anticipate when actors will tend to use it specifically or generically (see Brown 1958), and when those tendencies might be flouted, when speakers might, for example, over- or underspecify in the pursuit of some interactional effect.

Apparently, when Ludwig Wittgenstein found someone especially kind, generous, or honest, he would underline that fact by proclaiming: “He is a *human being*!” (Malcolm, Wright, & Wittgenstein 2001:52). Likewise, it may seem odd to describe a person with the relatively wide-angled description of ‘not being a dog’, but, as Keane (2016:12; citing Gilbert) recounts, that apparently ‘underspecified’ ascription has been used at least once to stop a mob from throwing a little girl into a well.

Fourth, exploring generics puts front and center questions concerning the ontological status of the ‘kinds’, ‘categories’, ‘genres’, and ‘social types’ that are central objects of analysis in studies of language in society. Definitionally, these are the referents of generics. But this definition itself opens rather than resolves several questions. We might wonder, for example, whether the kinds to which generics refer are discursive objects, always linguistically mediated in time, or whether they are conceptual ones; whether they are of the same order as the kinds and categories that underlie and are produced by ‘semiotic ontologies’ (Kockelman 2013); or whether our understanding of conceptual categories is itself modeled on our use of generic language.

Perhaps generics will lead us to conclude that notions of ‘kind’, ‘type’, or ‘category’ might be better replaced with processual analytics, which thematize the heterogeneity of kind-making, typifying, and categorizing practices. Or perhaps we will find something else. As the contributions that follow make clear, on these and many other issues, generics offer an arena for exploration, a name for a ubiquitous variety of ‘explicit’ discourse that scholars study and at times avoid, and a way forward for grounding abstract talk in the flow of interaction.

This special issue concludes with a coda from the late Michael Silverstein. Silverstein’s impact on the study of language in society is incalculable, and his recent, untimely passing fills us all—his students, his students’ students, and his colleagues—with great sadness. He wrote the comments printed here as co-discussant for a panel at the Annual Meeting of the 2019 American Anthropological Association on which this special issue is based. When the conference was in view, he was already too sick to travel. He nevertheless prepared remarks on the papers, which were read aloud by the panel chair, Scott MacLochlainn. As we readied this issue for submission, he permitted us to print these ‘telegraphic comments’ alongside our articles. We have done so here. His words are characteristically incisive, witty, and scintillating. They remind us of all that we have lost.

NOTE

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