

# Accommodation, Inference, Generics & Pejoratives

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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To give an account of norms governing  
our uses of *generics*, and our *infererring*,  
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.*

Thanks to the Australian Research Council, for funding supporting this research (DP180103687).

Motivation & Background

Generics & Inference

Accommodation & Inference

The Semantics of Pejoratives

Options for Critique & Reform

# MOTIVATION & BACKGROUND

## Problem 1: Generics

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Birds lay eggs.

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Logic talks are boring.

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Mosquitos transmit West Nile Virus.



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Men are aggressive.

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Mosquitos transmit West Nile Virus.

Cows are food.

Men are aggressive.

Muslims are terrorists.

Fs are Gs

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... are *pervasive*.

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... are *pervasive*.

... are *basic*.

Fs are Gs

... are *pervasive*.

... are *basic*.

... behave *very strangely*.

*Mosquitos transmit WNV* — what does this mean?

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*Mosquitos transmit WNV* — what does this mean?

**All** mosquitos transmit WNV.

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Most don't.

**Normal** mosquitos transmit WNV.

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Male mosquitos don't. They aren't normal?



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Male mosquitos don't. They aren't normal?

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

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

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Most don't.

~~**Normal** mosquitos transmit WNV.~~

Male mosquitos don't. They aren't normal?

Mosquitos ~~**are the kind of thing**~~  
~~**that**~~ transmit WNV.

They're also the kind of thing that doesn't—e.g. males, or those in Australia.

# Background 1: “Inferentialism”, broadly construed

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## Background 1: “Inferentialism”, broadly construed

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

## Problem 2: Pejoratives

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Using *boche* in this way encodes a substantial connection between being German, and being coarse.

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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$x$  is boring

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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.



## Background 2: *Semantics, Metasemantics and 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 our *practices*.

# GENERICS & INFERENCE

There are *many* accounts of  
the truth conditions of the generic

Ks are F

## Truth Conditions?

There are *many* accounts of  
the truth conditions of the generic

Ks are F

Any adequate account is *very* complicated.

## An example, from Sarah-Jane Leslie

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.

## The Approach I'll Explore

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

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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*.



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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)



## But what *do* they mean?

*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

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*Consider the difference:*

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## *Inferring* is an action

*Consider the difference:*

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

## *Reason giving appears in question answering*

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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.

## Reason giving can go in *both directions*

ABELARD: Does she have stripes?

ELOISE: Yes, she's a zebra.

ABELARD: Is she a zebra?

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Each direction can make sense,  
given an appropriate context.

## What *is* inference?

... or rather, what are we *doing* when we infer?

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- ▶ I won't commit myself to any particular analysis of the norms governing inference. (c.f. Brandom, in *Making it Explicit*, and his view of the relationship between inference, commitment and entitlement.)
- ▶ Inferring is a *speech act*, 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*.)

## What is inference?

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- ▶ Inferring is a *speech act*, 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*.)
- ▶ Making an inference is also not to be identified with offering a deductively valid argument, or taking yourself to do so.

## What is inference? (Cont.)

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

Tweety is a bird. So, Tweety flies.

## What is inference? (Cont.)

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~~.

Why (*do we/should we*) care about  
how our claims relate to one another?



## Why infer?

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how our claims relate to one another?

Why not just care about whether A and B are true,  
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## Why infer?

Why (*do we/should we*) care about  
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 kids ask *why* instead of just asking *whether*?)

# Two reasons for having a practice of inferring

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## **PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY**

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If we find a zebra...

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### THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

Is this a zebra?

## Two reasons for having a practice of inferring

### PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

If we find a zebra...

Suppose that *had been* a zebra

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## Two reasons for having a practice of inferring

### PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

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Is this a zebra?

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## Two reasons for having a practice of inferring

### PLANNING AND CONTINGENCY

If we find a zebra...

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Options for action

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If we find a zebra...

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*“Metaphysical”*

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*“Epistemic”*

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### THEORISING AND UNCERTAINTY

Is this a zebra?

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Options for belief

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*“Epistemic”*

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



## Claim 1: *Generics make inferential transitions explicit*

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— **Striped things are zebras.**

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— **Zebras have stripes.**

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— **Striped things are zebras.**

— **Striped horses are zebras.**

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

$Fs$  are  $Gs$ .



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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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  - ▶ 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*. **Does this carry WNV?**, well, **it's a mosquito.** This inferential practice is *safe*.



## Why *this* form?

We can infer from any A to any B.

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

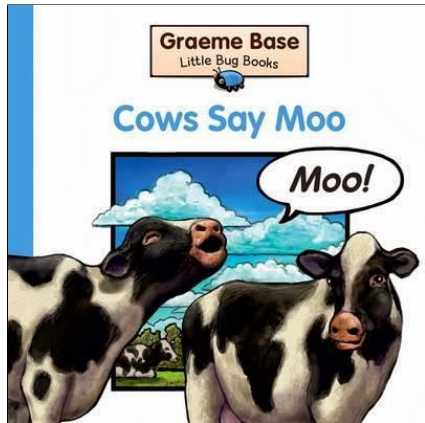
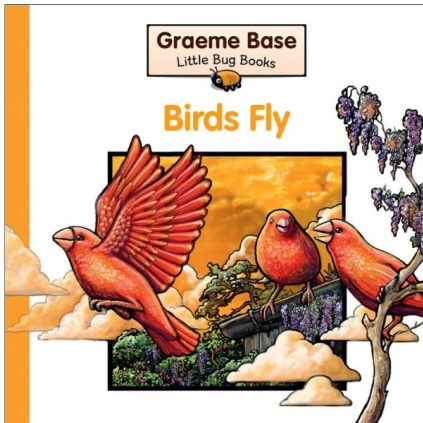
## Why *this* form?

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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 form suitable for explication  
by a generic (from  $Fx$  to  $Gx$ ) are widespread.

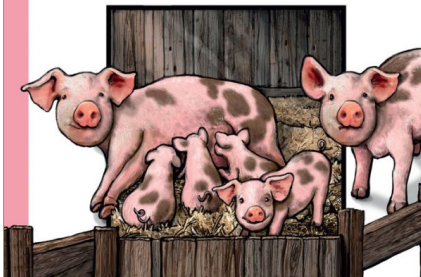


**Graeme Base**

Little Bug Books



## Pigs Have Piglets

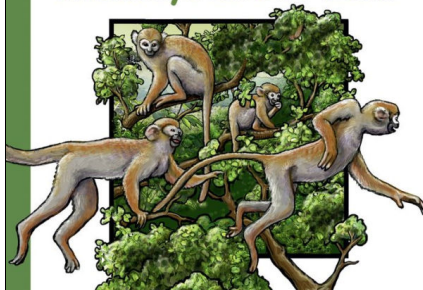


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## Monkeys Live in Trees



# Why make inference explicit?

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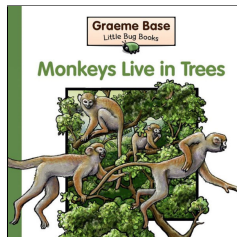
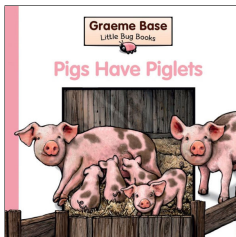
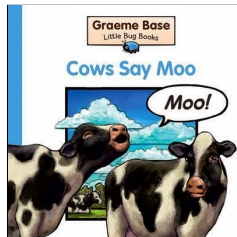
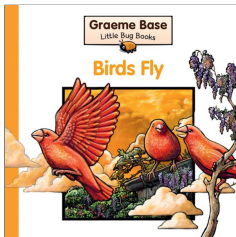
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To teach ...

## Why make inference explicit?

To teach ...  
... and to *refine*.

# Training for Inference





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."

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:

## *Refining Inference*

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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)?

## Refining Inference

You can object to my inference

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

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How do you voice objection (3)?

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

This is subtle

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What is it to *deny* that birds fly?

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What is it to *deny* that birds fly?

Birds *don't* fly?



## This is subtle

What is it to *deny* that birds fly?

Birds *don't* fly?

Fs are  $\neg$ Gs       $\neg$ (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.*

Resisting the inference from  $Fx$  to  $Gx$   
does not, by itself, offer an alternative inference.

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We'll return to this topic later.

# ACCOMMODATION & INFERENCE

## Common Ground

*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.

## One way to enter the common ground

*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.*

— Kai von Fintel  
“What is Presupposition Accommodation, Again?”  
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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*.

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

Rae Langton explores the ethical contours  
of accommodation phenomena  
in *Accommodating Injustice*.

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

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

**Striped things (here) are zebras.**

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

## This isn't *presupposition* accommodation

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

I can *reject* the inference  $Fa$ , so  $Ga$ ,  
while *accepting*  $Fa$  and  $Ga$ .

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accepted or rejected should make  
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If the inference is made explicit by  
a *generic* this can do the job.

## Consequences

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- ▶ This commitment (Fs are Gs) goes beyond the explicit subject matter (the object  $\alpha$ ) under discussion.
- ▶ 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

## Pejorative Inference Pairs

x is German

---

x is *boche*

## Pejorative Inference Pairs

x is German

---

x is *boche*

x is *boche*

---

x is coarse

## Pejorative Inference Pairs

x is German

---

x is *boche*

x is *boche*

---

x is coarse

x is a talk on proof theory

---

x is a *logic* talk

x is a *logic* talk

---

x 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 WNV.

Logic talks are boring.

## Striking properties and generics

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Muslims are terrorists.

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These are hard to uproot,  
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## Striking properties and generics

Mosquitos transmit WNV.

Logic talks are boring.

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

## How to deny a generic

- ▶ To reject deny Fs are Gs, you need to undercut the inference from Fa to Ga.

## How to deny a generic

- ▶ In a controlled environment, we can do this by being more *specific*. Moving from generics to explicitly stated quantifiers.

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



## How to deny a generic

- ▶ In a controlled environment, we can do this by being more *specific*. Moving from generics 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.

## How to deny a generic

- ▶ When G is a striking property, it's not enough to say that many or most Fs are not Gs.

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- ▶ 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 WNV.)

## How to deny a generic

- ▶ 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*.

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- ▶ 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*.  
(We don't ask ourselves if anyone is *boche*.)

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- ▶ 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  $Fa$ .

## How to deny a generic

- ▶ 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 WNV, then we could refine our generic to the more specific one, that Mosquitos of genus *Culex* carry WNV, while agreeing that mosquitos outside that genus *don't* carry WNV.

## How to deny a generic

- ▶ 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 WNV, then we could refine our generic to the more specific one, that Mosquitos of genus *Culex* carry WNV, while agreeing that mosquitos outside that genus *don't* carry WNV.
  - ▶ Explanations of this shape might undercut the generic Muslims are terrorists, by replacing them with better explanations.



## How to deny a generic

- ▶ 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!

Thank you!

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or *email* at [restall@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:restall@unimelb.edu.au)