

PHIL 234: Generics and Labels

Philosophy of Language Seminar

Spring 2025, Wed 4–6:50 PM, RWAC 472

Contact Information

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Office hours: Monday 11–12:30, or by appointment

Office hours location: RWAC 443, or Zoom by request

Course Description

Generic sentences, such as “Tigers have stripes” and “Sharks attack bathers” express generalizations without the use of any overt quantification. Generics are ubiquitous in language and, on the surface, look simpler than explicitly quantified generalizations (with quantifiers like “all”, “most”, etc.). However, it has been notoriously challenging to give a satisfactory account of the meaning of generics. We will begin the seminar with a review of some prominent proposals about the semantics of generics, appealing to primitive generalization, normality, and context-sensitivity. We will also consider how to account for the difference between descriptive generics (e.g., “Tigers have stripes”) and normative generics (e.g., “Boys don’t cry”).

Generics have received special attention in social philosophy of language because of the purported harms of generics about social categories. We will look at critiques of social generics, which point to the apparent link between generics and social essentialism, the slipperiness of generic interpretation, the way that generics can reinforce harmful ideologies, and more. We will then consider some defenses of social generics against these critiques. How unique are generics in promoting essentialism? To what extent do they even do so? Are there also positive uses of social generics?

Many of the issues that arise with social generics also arise with social category labels more broadly. We will look at arguments for why labels can be problematic, as well as defenses of (at least some) labeling practices. And we will aim to clarify for ourselves in what ways the issues raised by generics and labels are parallel and distinct.

Evaluation

Discussion questions and participation	20%
Presentation	15%
Paper(s)	65%

- **Discussion questions and participation:** By noon each Wednesday, all enrolled students should post a discussion question about one of the week's readings on a Canvas discussion board. Your post should be about a paragraph in length and include an explanation of the relevant context from the reading. In our class meetings, we will aim to address as many of your questions as possible. In class, I may ask you to briefly summarize your question for the group.

On the week of your presentation, you do not have to post a discussion question. You may also skip posting a question one other week without penalty.

All enrolled students are expected to attend seminar regularly and actively participate in discussion.

- **Presentation:** Once during the quarter, each student will be responsible for presenting an assigned reading with the help of a handout. You should upload your handout to the relevant Canvas assignment by noon on the day of your presentation. Your presentation should summarize and critically engage with the reading. Expect to start things off with 5–10 minutes of introduction/summary and then to walk through the rest of the presentation with interruptions for discussion.

- **Paper(s):**

- **Option 1:** Two short papers (2500-3000 words), one due Monday of week 6, one due by the end of exam week.
- **Option 2:** One longer paper (5000-7000 words), due by the end of exam week (Friday 6 PM). Students choosing this option should submit a proposal of approximately 300 words by the end of week 8.
- **Option 3 (hybrid):** If you submit a short paper by the first deadline under Option 1, you may choose to expand that paper into a longer paper rather than writing a second short paper. In this case, you should submit a proposal explaining your plan by the end of week 8.

During our final class meeting, all students will give a brief presentation of their final paper, as well as provide feedback on other students' work.

Grade breakdown: Week 10 paper presentation and feedback is worth 5% of your overall grade. If you choose Option 1, each paper is worth 30%. If you choose Option 2, your final paper is worth 60%. If you choose Option 3, your grade will

be based on whichever of the following would advantage you more: (i) short paper and final paper each worth 30%; (ii) final paper worth 60%. On Options 2 and 3, failure to submit a proposal will result in a 5% penalty on your final paper.

Note: Canvas may not accurately reflect your grade in our class.

Late work: If you are pursuing Option 1, you may request an extension of up to one week on your first short paper. The extension should be requested in writing before the deadline. Late papers without an extension will result in a 5% penalty per day late. No short papers will be accepted more than a week late.

Final papers are due 6 PM on Friday of exam week. Extensions through the weekend will be considered if requested in writing ahead of the due date. As you know, the turnaround time for final grades is tight, so extensions on the final paper are not guaranteed.

Discussion questions and presentation handouts should be completed by noon on the relevant day. I'll give a grace period up to 1 PM, but timely submission of these materials will help me prepare for our meetings. Submissions later than 1 PM may earn reduced or no credit.

Barring special circumstances (medical, family emergency, etc.), incompletes will only be granted with a clear plan for completing your work within two weeks after the end of the quarter, as well as assurances that you do not already have too many other incompletes on your plate. You should communicate with me about any incomplete requests by the end of exam week.

Schedule

Subject to change. Any changes will be announced on Canvas.

Week 1 – Introduction / Generics as primitive generalizations

- Sarah-Jane Leslie (2008), “Generics: Cognition and Acquisition”

Optional

- Rachel Sterken (2015), “Leslie on generics”
- Rachel Sterken (2015), “Generics, content, and cognitive bias”
- Mahrad Almotahari (2022), “Weak generics”

Week 2 – Generics and normality

- Bernhard Nickel (2009), “Generics and the ways of normality”
- Bernhard Nickel (2016), *Between Logic and the World*, Chapters 3 and 4.1

Week 3 – Context sensitivity and semantic underdetermination

- Rachel Sterken (2015), “Generics in context”
- Anthony Nguyen (2020), “The radical account of bare plural generics”

Optional

- Sally McConnell-Ginet (2012), “Generic predicates and interest-relativity”
- Junhyo Lee and Anthony Nguyen (2022), “What’s positive and negative about generics: a constrained indexical approach”

Week 4 – Normative generics

- Sarah-Jane Leslie (2015), “‘Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration: Dual character concepts, generics, and gender”
- Samia Hesni (2021), “Normative generics: Against semantic polysemy”
- Samia Hesni (2021), “Generics as instructions”

Optional

- Olivier Lemeire (2022), “‘Philosophers care about the truth’: Descriptive/normative generics”

Week 5 – Social generics: Challenges

- Sarah-Jane Leslie (2017), “The original sin of cognition: Fear, prejudice, and

- generalization”
- Sally Haslanger (2012), “Ideology, generics, and common ground”

Optional

- Rae Langton, Sally Haslanger, and Luvell Anderson (2012), “Language and race” (Section 3, “Racial generics”)
- Daniel Wodak, Sarah-Jane Leslie, and Marjorie Rhodes (2015), “What a loaded generalization: generics and social cognition”
- Daniel Wodak and Sarah-Jane Leslie (2017), “The mark of the plural: Generic generalizations and race”
- Susan Gelman (2003), *The Essential Child*, Chapters 1, 7, 8 (esp. pp. 193–227)
- Eleonore Neufeld (2022), “Psychological essentialism and the structure of concepts”

Week 6 – Social generics: Defenses

- Jennifer Saul (2023), “Are generics especially pernicious?”
- Katherine Ritchie (2019), “Should we use racial and gender generics?”
- Eleonore Neufeld, Anne Bosse, Guillermo Del Pinal, and Rachel Sterken (2024), “Giving generic language another thought”

Optional

- Matthew McKeever and Rachel Sterken (2021), “Social and political aspects of generic language and speech”
- Rachel Rudolph (forthcoming), “Social generics in context”

Week 7 – Generics as contrastive

- Will Fraker (2024), “Social kind generics and the dichotomizing perspective”
- Mahrad Almotahari (2024), “Generic cognition: A neglected source of context sensitivity”

Week 8 – Labels: Challenges

- Katherine Ritchie (2021), “Essentializing language and the prospects for ameliorative projects”
- Eleonore Neufeld (2023), “Engineering social concepts: Labels and the science of categorization”

Optional

- Susan Gelman (2003), *The Essential Child*, Chapter 8 (pp. 181–193)

Week 9 – Labels: Defenses

- Steffen Koch (2024), “Ameliorative projects, psychological essentialism, and the power of nouns”
- Katherine Ritchie (forthcoming), “Labeling unlabeled identities”

Optional

- Elisabeth Camp and Carolina Flores (2024), “Playing with labels: Identity terms as tools for building agency”

Week 10 – Paper presentations