Socio-political generics:
essentialist implicatures or essentialist readings?
A critique of Sally Haslanger's argument on the
meaning of socio-political generics

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1 Introduction

In her paper "Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground", Sally Haslanger (2011) offers the following examples, which are puzzling in terms of what they can mistakenly convey:

(1)   a.   Women are submissive (nurturing, cooperative).
       b.   Blacks are violent (criminal, dangerous).
       c.   Cows are food.
       d.   Sagging pants are cool.
       e.   Women wear lipstick.

The problem with such generics, as Haslanger argues, is that while there might be a true reading of them, they are often used or/and taken to carry false additional content, namely, an essentialist claim that Haslanger thinks they communicate. If any of those generics are true, they are true in virtue of the fact that the majority of subjects possess the property assigned to them. This is a descriptive reading of the statements, as it describes how the current state of affairs really is. Descriptively speaking, the statements can be true or false based on how the world is, which is unproblematic. However, a statement like those in (1), regardless of whether it is actually true or false, might be used and interpreted to be expressing something more than just this factual information. The additional content, that which Haslanger argues to be wrong and harmful, is an essentialist implicature which assigns the predicated properties to the very nature of these classes. If a statement is taken to convey such an implicature, then this interpretation will predict that, say, a woman is submissive even before she has expressed her submissiveness, because her submissiveness is believed to be her very essence by virtue of her being a woman. This false essentialist implicature is then taken for granted between the interlocutors of the conversation and the rest of the communication proceeds in the way that takes this falsehood to be true.

Haslanger builds her theory on the notions of implicature, ideology, common ground, and metalinguistic negation. Here, I am going to focus on implicature

only: I analyse Haslanger's argument that socio-political generics give rise to essentialist implicatures. I argue that Haslanger's proposal that generics deposit falsehoods into the common ground by conversationally implicating them is implausible. Rather, generics like the ones above are ambiguous between the descriptive and essentialist readings.

2 Implicature: standard implicatures versus Haslanger's proposed implicatures of socio-political generics

A great deal of what is communicated is communicated indirectly. Implicature is part of speaker meaning that is not explicitly said but is still an aspect of what is meant in an utterance. What is distinctive about socio-political generics that Haslanger puts forward is that by affirming them one conveys implicatures (or permits a situation in which such implicatures can be taken to be conveyed) that are false, Haslanger argues. I am now going to analyse what implicatures are proposed to be conveyed by Haslanger, how they arise and how plausible it is that these are the implicatures being conveyed. I arrive at the conclusion that such implicatures do not arise – by comparing them with standard implicatures and applying tests of cancellability, reinforcibility, and suspension to the target meaning about natures, the meaning in question appears unlikely to be an implicature. Essentialist propositions can instead be part of the semantic meaning of those generics, constituting one of the two readings that such generics are ambiguous between.

To get clear on what Haslanger's (2011: 14–15) argument is, it is worth dissecting the following extended quote:

> It seems that in the case of at least some generics, the semantics requires that there is some non-accidental or noncoincidental connection between the Fs and being G (recall the truth conditions for both characteristic generics and striking generics). The details may plausibly be spelled out along the lines Leslie suggests. However, given the usefulness and universality of the default mode of generalizing that Leslie describes, if one asserts that Fs are G, then it is implicated that under "normal" circumstances it is something about being an F that makes an F a G, that Fs as such are disposed to be G. This is a pragmatic implicature and can normally be defeated or cancelled. But if unchallenged, it licenses the inference from the generic Fs are G to a claim of generic essence: Fs are G by virtue of what it is to be (an) F. In conversations where we credit our interlocutor with the ability to recognize this default inference, we take their utterance of, say, 'tigers are striped,' to introduce into the common ground the further claim 'tigers are striped by virtue of what it is to be a tiger.'

Haslanger is endorsing Sarah-Jane Leslie's (2007) categorisation of generics and is comparing the generics in question to what Leslie calls characteristic generics and striking property generics. In both categories, a non-accidental connection between the subject and the attributed to it property is proposed. In the case of striking property generics, those members of the kind that do not actually have the property are claimed to have a disposition to have it (Leslie 2007: 385). In the case of characteristic generics, the property is attributed not to individual members, but to a whole kind. Counterfactuals hold with these generics: if it were a normal or a relevant member of the kind, it would have the property, because having it or being able to have it if the right circumstances held is essential to the kind. It is a property that is characteristic of the kind. Haslanger proposes that the generics in (1) are, if affirmed, taken to express this feature of non-accidentality, just like generics of the named groups.

There are two ways one can read Haslanger's idea in terms of what is taken to be implicated and how. Firstly, an implicature can be a conditional that deposits a deductively valid inference into the common ground. Secondly, the same falsehood can be directly communicated as an implicature.

Let's consider the first proposal first. When someone says *Fs are G* what they implicate is a conditional of the form *If Fs are G, then Fs are G by nature*. Then by affirming the antecedent, the consequent gets introduced into the common ground: *Fs are G by nature.*

Haslanger (2011: 9) points out that she is not interested in the truth-conditions of generics. What interests her is what can be pragmatically conveyed by them. The affirmation of the antecedent of the implied conditional depends not on whether or not Fs really are G, but on the affirmation of the claim.

If this is what Haslanger has in mind, then the conditional should be implicated every time any generic is mentioned. On this view, if I say "Shops are closed on Sunday", what I mean is that it is somehow in the nature of shops that they are closed on Sunday. There is undoubtedly a reason for why things are the way they are, but what Haslanger argues for is that the reason must be found in the nature of the subject. Being closed on Sunday would constitute the shop-ness of shops on this interpretation.

It is clear that in at least many, if not the majority of, generics the speakers do not implicate a kind conditional – speaking about natures seems a rather restricted domain of discourse. Even if it turns out to be true that sometimes a statement about natures is implicated, Haslanger's argument is missing a step that would explain what differentiates "some generics" that she is focusing on from other generics. There is a question about the uniqueness of these generics versus all others in terms of triggering the supposed implicature that is left unanswered.

However, it is unlikely that the claim about natures can even be considered an implicature, as Saul (2017: 5) argues. Saul does not think it plausible that a claim about natures is conversationally implicated, since for it to be so implicated, the

speaker should not be able to make sense of the utterance as cooperative without attributing the belief of the implicature to the speaker, but it is not the case that to treat the generics in (1) one needs to assume that the speaker is holding and implicating an essentialist belief.

I agree with Saul on this point. The contrast between the two following dialogues will demonstrate why Saul's argument works. The following conversation can be constructed:

(2)　　B:　What do you think women are like?
　　　　A:　Women are submissive.
　　　　　　(supposed implicature: women are submissive by nature) [pause]
　　　　　　But not because their brains are wired this way.
　　　　B:　Oh I didn't take you to mean that, I thought you were describing the status of women under patriarchy.

Speaker A denies the supposed essentialist implicature, after which speaker B demonstrates that A's utterance was understood as cooperative without B's believing that A holds the essentialist implicature to be true. The supposed implicature is not necessary to be prompted by A's utterance and it is not necessary for B to assume that A believes this implicature in order for that utterance to be informative or/and relevant.

Contrast this with the following dialogue featuring a genuine implicature:

(3)　　A:　Are you going to the pub tonight?
　　　　B:　I have essays to mark and an important phone call to make. (implicature: B is not going to the pub) [pause] But I wasn't planning on doing either. See you later!

Were such a dialogue to occur, B would be behaving uncooperatively in it, as they would be saying something that they know to be irrelevant and more than required from A in order for B to answer A's question. B's cancelling the implicature here deems the utterance that prompted it unnecessary and B uncooperative as an interlocutor. This is unless B was not being serious and was trying to intentionally mislead A, which would have created a somewhat humorous effect.

The implicature that Haslanger is proposing is not a genuine implicature. Instead, it is another reading of the generic. Haslanger has confused the choice of one reading over the other with the cancellability of what she takes to be an implicature.

Saul (2017: 5) argues that it is more likely that a particular type of conversational implicature is being expressed, namely, one about relevance: it is thought to be relevant that it is F, rather than another group that are G. It does not include anything about natures. The very fact of someone expressing a generalisation like (1) signifies that they think that by doing so they will indirectly put across some relevant information. If one were to say Fs are G without the inten-

tion of saying something informative, they would be an uncooperative speaker. A relevance implicature arises when it appears that the maxim of relevance has been flouted – in other words, when the speaker makes a claim that seems to be irrelevant, but turns out to be relevant. It commonly arises as an indirect response to questions. Here is one example (adapted from Hirschberg 1985 and discussed in Potts 2015):

(4)   Ann: Do you sell paste?
        Bill: I sell rubber cement. (implicature: Bill does not sell paste.)

If Bill is assumed to be a cooperative speaker, he will try to resolve Ann's question by answering that he either sells or does not sell paste. Instead he chooses an indirect route of saying that he sells cement, which is not related to him selling or not selling paste. Since there is no connection between the two, Bill's response seems obscure and irrelevant, but having assumed Bill being cooperative, it can be concluded that he does not sell paste.

Saul's suggestion seems likely as there are contexts in which these generics will give rise to relevance implicatures, even about natures. A dialogue akin to the one above can be constructed for the women generic from (1):

(5)   Ann: Do you think that in a world free of patriarchal oppression, women
             will occupy top leadership positions?
        Bill: Women would still be submissive.

The speaker here is saying that women are by nature submissive and will continue to be that way as they are submissive by nature and it cannot be remedied through managing the environmental factors. But why is it a pragmatic implicature as opposed to the core semantic meaning of the generic? The standard features of implicature are cancellability, reinforcement, and suspension. I will now test the proposition about natures to see whether it has these characteristics.

Cancelling an implicature is encoding semantically the negation of the target meaning (Potts 2022: 5). If it results in consistency, then the tested meaning is likely to be an implicature. For example, I can say "Some, in fact all students came to my seminar today", thereby cancelling the implicature that not all students did. If Bill tried cancelling his implicature, he could add the following:

(6)   Bill: But they are only made submissive, not born submissive.

An addition like this is not available for Bill, as his supposed implicature was meant to show just the opposite. This is inconsistent with Bill's original claim, as it shows that cancelling the proposition about natures results in Bill's original utterance being infelicitous.

Reinforcing an implicature is encoding semantically the target meaning (Potts 2022: 5). For example, I could say "Some, but not all students came to my sem-

inar today", which reinforces the implicature that not all of them did. Bill could reinforce what he said by saying:

(7)   Bill: Women would still be submissive, because they are submissive by nature.

The result is non-redundant. Although it indicates that the target meaning is likely an implicature, it does not guarantee it. As with entailments, the clarification clause serves as unpacking of the encoded meaning ("Tigers were, are, and will be striped, as they are striped by nature").

Lastly, suspension is encoding semantically a lack of knowledge about the truth of the target meaning or its negation ("Some, maybe even all students came to my seminar today") (Potts 2022: 5). A consistent result will show that the target meaning is likely an implicature.

(8)   Bill: Women would still be submissive, as they might [not] be submissive by nature.

The result is inconsistent, as if the negation of the target meaning is true, Bill's claim is false. The truth of Bill's utterance depends entirely on the presupposition that women are submissive by nature.

3   The semantics of socio-political generics

I see these socio-political generics introducing the falsehoods that Haslanger talks about into the common ground, but I do not think that this feature of the named generics can be explained pragmatically. As I have argued, it is extremely unlikely that these falsehoods are implicatures. I adopt a semantic approach, according to which the different propositions conveyed by these generics are due to semantic factors. It can be that these generics are ambiguous and that they express different propositions in different situations, depending on what the relevant question under discussion is, which I discuss first. Or, it may be that such generics are context-sensitive and the Gen operator in the generics is an indexical, similar to those like "I", "today", or "there", on the model of Sterken (2015), which I discuss at the end. I will argue that the ambiguity account explains the complexity of socio-political generics better than the indexical account.

Both the kind reading and the descriptive reading can be intended in different contexts that settle the question under discussion. It can be intended that "women are submissive" as a kind. The question under discussion that this generic is answering is then "What subgroup of humans is submissive by nature?" The truth-conditions of the generics provide conditions under which this statement would be true and do not affirm the truth of a given generic. The generic "Tigers fly" is false, but this falsity does not prevent the generic to be read and intended as a kind generic. Another reading of the women generic will

be prompted by another question. Such question can be, for example, "What subgroup of humans is more often submissive than men?" The generic "women are submissive" will express the proposition "women are statistically more often submissive than men." One and the same subject can use both readings in different contexts, answering the relevant question under discussion.

Generics can also be context-sensitive in the peculiar way that indexicals are. On the indexical view of generics, which Sterken (2015) argues for, generics are context-sensitive in a distinctive to them way (Sterken 2015: 11–15). Sterken (2015: 3) argues that the implicit unpronounced quantifier expression, Gen, in the logical form of generic sentences should be interpreted on the model of demonstratives, like "that". Firstly, Sterken (2015: 4–5) argues that generics vary in their quantificational force, meaning that Gen can be equated to the standard quantifiers "most", "some" or "all". For instance, in the generic "Horses are mammals", Gen means "all", while in "Horses are smart animals", Gen means "some". In the descriptive reading of "Women are submissive", gen would act as "most" on this account. In addition to changes in quantificational force, generics also vary in their lexical restrictor, as Sterken (2015) argues. One of the dominant views takes generics to be affirmed or denied according to some normalcy standard (Asher and Morreau 1995). Other accounts have proposed that generics express intentionality, stereotypes, prototypes, etc. On Sterken's view, generics are distinctive as compared to quantified statements in that the lexical restrictor can vary between those different standards. To account for the kind reading of the women generic, Gen would need to range over the kind and to account for the descriptive reading Gen would need to range over actual women.

The argument that Sterken offers does not offer a convincing explanation of the context-sensitivity of generics. If Gen is an indexical, it should pick out different referents based on the contexts, in a way similar to the standard indexicals, like "I" or "here". Jeffrey King (2008) has argued that complex demonstratives, or "that-phrases" are not directly referential, as treating them as such does not account for quantifying uses. For instance, "Most avid skiers remember that first black diamond run they skied" features an indexical "that" which is bound by the quantifying phrase "most avid skiers". In sentences like these the that-phrase does not refer to any particular run, but to whichever run was the first one for a given skier. This use of "that" is indexical and quantificational. Gen, on Streken's account, is such indexical quantifier. However, there is little in common between Gen and other indexicals, even the "that" in its quantificational use, the reason for it being that an indexical does not change its meaning, it only changes its referent. Sterken's idea of Gen is that it changes both as a quantifier and also as a lexical restrictor. In other words, it changes its meaning. While in one context Gen means "some", in another it means "all", and yet in another it means something along the lines of a "normal representative", etc.

4   Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined Haslanger's argument that socio-political generics give rise to false essentialist implicatures and argued that no such implicatures arise. I have applied three standard tests for implicatures two of which have resulted in inconsistency. This strongly suggests that the meaning which Haslanger takes to be implicatures is required for understanding what those socio-political generics mean. In other words, they constitute the core meaning of the generics rather than additional, pragmatically conveyed content. The semantic account, precisely, the ambiguity view, is more successful at providing an explanation for the truth-conditional variability of socio-political generics which can still be interpreted in the essentialist way, this interpretation stemming from the semantically encoded meaning of these generics.

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