Language of Essence

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Abstract: Linguistic form can increase our propensity to essentialize. In this entry I first outline the features and empirical research related to representational essentialism. I then consider four components of natural language that have been argued to have connections to essentialism—generic generalizations, natural kind terms, slurs, and nouns. Finally, I consider the broader philosophical import of these arguments.

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How we structure our utterances and what words we use can affect what is conveyed, what comes to mind, and the sorts of judgements we are apt to make. For example, saying that someone is "an addict" and saying that someone "struggles with addiction" might lead to different judgments about the degree to which addiction is a defining feature of the person, whether this feature is contingent, and how much it explains about the person's behavior. Similarly "Raccoons eat avocados" and "Some raccoon has eaten an avocado" convey propositions of very different strengths. The former is a generic generalization which might be taken to be saying something (perhaps false) about a central feature of the entire kind *raccoons*. The latter, in contrast, is merely describing what some raccoon has done on an occasion. Expressions like "gold" have been taken to be semantically distinct from descriptions like "a soft yellow metallic substance" in that that the former, but not the latter, has its extension determined by causal relations between a naming event and a substance with an underlying essence (Kripke 1980). Philosophers and psychologists have considered the ways using locutions like "an F", kind terms, and generics might, in one way or another, be getting at what people take to be *essential* (or not) to a person or kind.

In this chapter I will consider the way that language affects our judgments about essence. The discussion will center on how we represent the world psychologically and linguistically, but I will also consider ways these representations might place constraints or reveal ways the world really is. For instance, it could be that certain linguistic constructions elicit robust judgments about some feature (e.g., eating avocados, having stripes, being athletic) being central to someone's or some kind's identity. If so, then it might be that we would judge that the person or kind would not persist through changes to this feature. Or, it might be that we would then judge that the true nature of the person or the kind involves *F-ness.* Or perhaps that a kind member that failed to express this feature was in some way defective or an anomaly. Our language might also impose this as a

restriction on anything that a term picks out. For instance, something might need to have the chemical structure H_2O in order to fall in the extension of "water". That a term requires anything in its extension to have essence E does not show that there really is any thing which has E; the term could be empty, picking out nothing at all. Language itself might mislead us in systematic ways, so that we very often judge that something is essential when in fact it is not. While much of my focus here will be on our representations rather than reality, in the final section, I draw out some broader ramifications that essentialist language might have for other philosophical projects, including metaphysics.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I consider the ways "essence" is usually understood in debates about essentialist thought and language (§*I*). These do not always track how philosophers interested in essence use the term. Then I consider four components of natural language that have been argued to involve essentialism or to elicit essentialist thinking—generics, slurs and derogatory terms, natural kind terms, and nouns (§*II*). I offer examples of each and consider arguments that purport to show that these linguistic constructions or expression types essentialize. Finally, I consider what the foregoing discussion might reveal about philosophical methodology, metaphysics, and social and political projects (§*III*).

I. Representational Essentialism

While many of the other chapters in this handbook are focused on the metaphysics of essence (e.g., Wildman, this volume; Correia, this volume; Mackie, this volume; Tahko, this volume; Robertson, this volume), this chapter will focus primarily on representational or psychological essentialism. Understood in this way, essentialism is about how we humans reason, explain, and make judgments about things and stuff in the world. The psychologist Susan Gelman takes

representational essentialism to involve two components. First, a kind component "that people treat certain categories as richly structured 'kinds' with clusters of correlated properties" (2004: 408). And, second, an essence component "that people believe a category has an underlying property (essence) that cannot be observed directly but that causes the observable qualities that category members share" (ibid.). Understood in this way, psychological essentialism can apply to our representations of kinds—like sharks and gold and men and women. The essence component of psychological essentialism has also been found to hold of representations of individuals (Christy, Schlegel & Cimpian 2019; De Freitas, Tobia, Newman & Knobe 2017). For instance, one might think that there is some deeper essence to being you, that determines your identity across time. It isn't your appearance, but this deeper thing (perhaps your DNA, perhaps some essential character traits) that makes you you. To unify psychological essentialism about kinds and individuals, one could adopt an idea from Newman and Knobe (2019). They state that at its core psychological essentialism involves a "tendency to try to explain observable features in terms of a further unifying principle" (Newman and Knobe 2019: 2). This way of framing psychological essentialism leaves open two questions. First, how are essences represented? Second, what sorts of explanation relations might hold between observable features and underlying essences?

Psychologists tend to hold that we often fail to have specific and well elaborated representations of essences and instead represent kinds with a placeholder essence that could be further explicated and about which we might defer to experts (Medin & Ortony 1989). For example, someone might think that there is some underlying essence that makes polar bears polar bears, without having a representation of exactly what that is. Much of the psychological research on essentialism has focused on investigating representations of animal kinds and human categories like race and gender. Reserachers have found that underlying essences of these categoreis are

usually taken to be, in some way or other, biological in nature. For instance, people might represent women as sharing DNA and take that to be the essence of the kind *women*. This, however, is not to say that this representation is correct as biological essentialism about gender is widely discredited (e.g., de Beauvoir 1972 [1949]; Haslanger 2003; Stoljar, this volume). Rather, the claim is that people often *represent* social categories like race and gender as having biological essences.

More recently, some have argued that essences could also involve underlying values/ideals or a telos. For instance, membership in the category *scientist* plausibly does not depend on biology, but it might still involve positing an essence—in this case perhaps something about seeking out truths about the nature of the world via systematic observations and testing (Newman & Knobe 2019; Tobia, Newman, Knobe, 2020). Some kinds might have a teleological essence relating to, e.g., their role in an ecosystem (Rose & Nichols 2020; cf. Neufeld 2021).

Until very recently, the explanation relation was uniformly taken to be causal in nature. For instance, as we see stated in the Gelman quote above, essences are often taken to be underlying features that *cause* observable features. More recently, some have argued that a more general realization relation might be required to capture the broader range of essentialized representations. Newman & Knobe (2019) argue that the underlying value taken to be the essence of scientists might realize, but not cause, certain behaviors like carrying out meticulous observational studies.

Psychologists have developed a number of experimental methods to test to see whether children and adults hold essentialist views about various categories and individuals. The main features that have been tested for are the following (see, Gelman 2003: Ch. 1; Rhodes & Moty 2020 for further discussion):

- **Hidden and Not Directly Observable:** if a category is not determined by observable features (e.g., things that are blue), but in a way that relies on something unobservable and underlying, then it is taken to be represented as having an essence (Markman 1989; Keil 1989; Gelman 2003; Bloom 2004).
- **Inductive Potential and Homogeneity:** if a category is seen as having high inductive potential, this is argued to show that it is represented as a kind with an underlying essence. Category members in essentialized categories are also taken to be fairly homogenous. (Markman 1989; Gelman 2003, 2004; cf. Noyes & Keil 2019; Noyes, Dunham, Keil, & Ritchie 2021)
- **Heritability and Mutability:** if membership in a category is taken to be immutable (or at least quite stable across situations) or inheritable this is taken to show that the category is represented as a kind with an underlying essence (Keil 1989; Gelman & Wellman 1991)
- **Explanation:** if a category figures in explanations like the following, *a* is *F* because *a* is a member of category *C*, this is taken to support the view that *C* is represented as a kind with an underlying essence (Prasada & Dillingham 2006, 2009)
- **Discrete Category Boundaries:** essentialized categories have discrete boundaries. Something either is or is not a member of the category, rather than sort of being a member of the kind.

A number of different procedures have been designed to test for these features. To test whether category membership is determined by observable features or something underlying and unobservable, Gelman and Markman (1986; 1987) designed an appearance foil triad task. In this task participants are presented with three images. For example, one set of images included pictures

of a black beetle, a green leaf insect, and a green leaf. While the leaf insect and leaf were superficially very similar, if the images were labeled as "bug" and "leaf" Gelman and Markman found that children expected the two bugs to be more similar than the leaf and the leaf insect. This shows that inductive potential aligns with category labels and does not just rely on commonalities in observable features like color and shape.

To test for heritability, Gelman and Wellman (1991) developed the switched-at-birth task (Gelman & Wellman,1991). This paradigm involves asking participants whether some creature that is born to parents of kind K1 but raised by parents of kind K2 will have features characteristic of K1s or K2s. For instance, will a skunk baby that is raised by dogs bark (like dogs) or spray an unpleasant smelling substance (like skunks) when it is scared? If participants tend to think that it will have the skunk-property, this is taken to show that kind membership is not easily mutable and so, that the kind is represented as having an essence.

It has been found that many biological and social kinds like race and gender are judged in ways that fit with psychological essentialism (Rothbart & Taylor 1992; Haslam, Rothchild, & Ernst 2002). Essentialist thinking plays a role in how we categorize, the inductive inferences we are apt to draw, what explanations we take to be licensed, and so on. These can be advantageous. For instance, essentialism might play a role in explaining why a drug that helps horses is not effective as a treatment in humans—the two kinds have different biological essences. Essentialism has also been argued to lead to significant harms, including dehumanization and increased stereotyping (Bastian & Haslam 2006, 2007; Haslam et al. 2002; Tirrell 2012; Livingstone Smith 2020; Neufeld 2020; but cf. Haslam & Levy 2006). Better understanding how language can elicit essentialism may be an important component in determining how to successfully mitigate prejudice and forge positive social change.

While language is not the only driving force behind psychological essentialism (it might be an innate cognitive bias, there could be cultural effects, etc.), the language we use affects our judgments and our tendencies to essentialize. In the next four subsections, I consider four construction or expression types that have been argued to elicit psychological essentialism.

II. Linguistic Constructions and Expression Types

A. Generic Generalizations

Various construction types and expressions have been argued to essentialize. Generics, or generic generalizations, have been the primary focus of psychologists working on language and essentialism, and have gained prominence in recent work in philosophy largely due to the work of Sarah-Jane Leslie (2008, 2013, 2017). Generics are constructions in which a property is generalized across a category or kind without overt quantifiers like *some*, *all*, or *many*. Generics have been of particular interest for a number of reasons including that their semantics has proved difficult to correctly formalize, their connections with normativity (as in 1), and their connections with stereotypes about groups of people as in 2-3.

1. Fans don't let fans drive drunk/high.[i]
2. Girls are bad at math.
3. Black people are good at basketball.

In English generics can be expressed using bare plurals (1-4), indefinite singulars (5), or definite singulars (6).

4. Birds fly.
5. A true friend always has your back.
6. The whale is a mammal.

Bare plural constructions (BPs) are the most permissive form with which to express generic generalizations in English. They are also the most widely studied. I'll focus my discussion here primarily on BPs, but consider arguments that the truth of indefinite singular generics (ISs) require that the property predicated be essential to the kind at the end of this section.

To begin let's consider two important features of generics. First, they can require more than just an accidental universal generalization.[ii] For instance, suppose that as it turns out, everyone who has ever been a member of the US Supreme Court has an even social security number. Nevertheless, 7 does not strike most as true (Dahl 1975).

7. Supreme Court Justices have even SSNs.

This shows that generics do, or can, require something stronger than actual universal generalization. They seem to have some sort of modal force. Call this feature *Non-Accidental Generalization.* A non-accidental generalization suggests that there must be some explanation for why the generalization holds. That the kind or category has an underlying essence would serve as such an explanation. For instance, birds fly because they have an underlying essence that leads them to share this type of locomotion.

The second important feature of generics is that they can be true even if there are (perhaps many) exceptions. For instance, someone who learns of Ada Lovelace's mathematical accomplishments, can still retain their belief that 2 is true. Similarly, even though penguins do not fly, most of us accept that 4 is a true generalization. Further, there isn't a precise proportion of category members that need to have a property to be true. While most birds fly, less than half of birds lay eggs. Yet, people accept that it is true that birds lay eggs. Leslie (2008) pointed out that even when a minuscule number of a kind's members have a property, a generic might be accepted as in 8.

8. Mosquitoes carry West Nile virus.

Given this feature, which I'll call *Tolerate Exceptions*, generics are hard to falsify.

A number of theorists have argued that generics elicit essentialist thinking about kinds (e.g., Gelman 2003; Haslanger 2011; Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek 2012; Langton, Haslanger, & Anderson 2012; Cimpian & Markman 2011; Wodak & Leslie 2017). For instance Wodak & Leslie claim that we should understand a generic like 'Ks are F' "as by default communicating that members of the kind [K] share some distinctive, non-obvious and persistent property or underlying nature that casually grounds their common properties and dispositions, and that the property [F] is characteristic of that kind (i.e., widely posed by individuals who are [K] in virtue of their shared intrinsic nature)" (2017: 279).

There is a significant body of empirical research suggesting that generics essentialize. Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek (2012) found that generic language facilitates the formation and transmission of essentialist beliefs about novel social categories. They argued for their conclusion by showing that heritability, inductive potential, and explanation ratings were higher when children heard generics about novel kinds (e.g., "Zarpies climb trees") than other sorts of construction ("this Zarpie/this one climbs trees"). So they conclude that hearing generic language leads to the formation of essentialist beliefs about a category. Foster-Hanson, Leslie, & Rhodes (2016) found that even negated generics like 9 increase judgments that there is an essence that kind members share.

9. Girls don't hate math.

While this research provides evidence that the use of generics can augment essentialist thinking, there are other bodies of work suggesting an alternative explanation. Some argue that generics are connected to kinds, but not necessarily kinds that are taken to have essences (Noyes

& Keil 2019; Ritchie & Knobe 2020, Hoicka et al. 2021). They argue that some of the features taken to reveal a commitment to psychological essentialism are better understood in terms of representing a category as a kind or in terms of a psychological tendency to generalize, neither of which are necessarily connected to essentialist thinking. Hoicka et al. (2021) argue that both generics and high-proportion quantifiers for novel kinds, like "Daxes hate ice cream" or "Most Daxes hate ice cream", lead adults and to some degree children to generalize properties across category members, but not to essentialize.

In other work generics have been argued to connect to structural reasoning (Vasilyeva, Gopnik, and Lombrozo 2018; Ritchie 2019; Vasilyeva & Lombroza 2020). For example Vasilyeva & Lombroza (2020) found that people accepted generics when there were structural explanations for the connection between a category and property, like explanations involving governmental policies or access to health care. The truth of a generalization and a kind having inductive potential could rely on positioning within a broader external structure, without there being an innate unobservable biological essence (see also, Noyes, Dunham, Keil, & Ritchie 2021). Notice that structural explanations of generics and inductive potential also offer an explanation for *Non-Accidental Generalization.* In this case, rather than an inherent essence, it is shared social structural positioning that elicits the acceptability of the generic, judgments of strong inductive potential, and so on.

Given that generics are licensed and true even without an intrinsic essentialist explanation, it is too strong to conclude that generics always essentialize. It has been argued, however, that generics of a particular form—namely indefinite singular generics, like 5 above—are always connected to essence (Lawler 1973; Burton-Roberts 1977). The idea is that the differences in

distribution patterns of generic interpretations of BPs (10a, 10b) and ISs (11a, 11b) reveals that ISs only have generic interpretations when the predicated property is essential to the kind.

10. a. Bachelors are tall.

    b. Bachelors are unmarried.

11. a. A bachelor is tall.

    b. A bachelor is unmarried.

Notice that while both 10a and 10b can have generic interpretations, the pair in 11 is different. It appears as if 11a has only an existential interpretation, while 11b has both a generic and existential reading. Since being tall is plausibly not essential to being a bachelor, but being unmarried is, the restriction to essential properties for IS generics could explain this difference in readings. However, it cannot adequately capture the felicitous generic interpretations of sentences like 12-13.

12. A toddler is a handful.

13. An elephant never forgets.

These properties are not plausibly essential to the kinds *toddler* or *elephant*. So, it is too strong to require that properties predicated in IS generics be essential (see Cohen (2001) for an alternative account and further discussion).

While evidence is mixed, there is evidence that generics increase essentialism and that IS generics are more felicitous with essential or definitional properties than other properties. There are differences across domains that show that these patterns are not completely general (e.g., children and adults tend to essentialize animal categories more than artifactual categories; Gelman 2003; Keil 1989), nevertheless, the connection between generics and essentialism is fairly closely tied to certain linguistic construction types. It is generic interpretations of constructions of the form

'As are F 'or 'An A is F' , across various choices of 'A' and 'F', that elicit increased essentialism. In contrast, there are several threads of research focusing on subsets of nouns and arguing that these expressions essentialize. I consider classic arguments about natural kind terms and essence next, then turn to arguments that slurs essentialize in the following section.

B. Natural Kind Terms

In analytic philosophy, the most famous discussions of the connections between language and essence are Putnam-Kripke style arguments about natural kind terms (like 'water', 'tiger', and 'gold') and names (like 'Paderewski'). I'll focus on the arguments applied to natural kind terms (perhaps correctly thought of as names of species) here. Putnam's versions of the arguments squarely target internalism about meaning, that the meaning of a term is what individual language-users psychologically represent and which thereby determines the extension of the term. Kripke's arguments target descriptivism about meaning, that the meaning of a term is a cluster of descriptions and reference is fixed through satisfying descriptions. Both hold views that connect to essentialism (Kripke 1980, Putnam 1975; see Koslicki 2008 for an overview).

Putnam (1975) appeals to a thought experiment involving Twin Earth to argue for an externalist view of natural kind terms. In it we are asked to imagine a world superficially similar to ours with a substance that looks, smells, feels, and behaves like water, but which has a different chemical composition abbreviated as XYZ. We are asked to also suppose that on Twin Earth there are Twin English speakers who use a language that is phonologically and orthographically identical to English. The Putnam has us imagine an Earthian, Oscar, and his Twin Earthian duplicate, Twin Oscar. Both have thoughts about liquids, being thirsty, and so on. Putnam argues that while Oscar and Twin Oscar are duplicates, *intuitively*, Oscar thinks and talks about water (H_2O) while Twin Oscar thinks and talks about twin water (XYZ). So, he concludes, meanings just aren't in the head! External features including

microstructural properties that language users may not represent at all are relevant to the extension of natural kind terms.

Kripke argues that a natural kind term like 'tiger' does not have a descriptive meaning like the ferocious carnivorous four-legged feline with tawny fur, black stripes, and a white belly. We might find, for example, a tiger without a white belly or with only three-legs and it would still fall in the extension of 'tiger'. So meeting these descriptions is not necessary. Moreover, we might find out that *no* tigers are really orange (we were all suffering from an optical illusion). So, Kripke argues, the extension of 'tiger' is not determined by meeting this description. Rather, Kripke holds that we take the term "in advance" to "designate a species" with an underlying internal structure (= essence) we perhaps have yet to discover and then hold "that anything not of this species, even though it looks like a tiger, is not in fact a tiger" (Kripke 1980: 121). The Putnam-Kripke arguments fit closely with the idea outlined in §I that categories with essences are not determined by observable features but by an underlying essence.

Given this view of the semantics of natural kind terms, some purported kind terms are necessarily empty (i.e., that they necessarily have nothing in their extension). For example, Kripke argues that unicorns are necessarily non-existent and that the actual word 'unicorn' as used by us is necessarily empty (Kripke 2013). The argument relies on the view that unicorns are supposed to be a mythological *species* and the view that to be a species is to have an essence, not merely to be superficially similar (e.g., a horse-like creature with a single horn on its forehead). So, while there are possible horse-like creatures with a single horn, these possible creatures could have various different underlying biological natures, evolutionary histories, and so on. If 'unicorn' had an extension it would need to pick out one of these possible species. But, there is nothing to single out possible species 1, from possible species 2, from … in order to make *it* the referent of 'unicorn'. So, Kripke concludes, we cannot say that unicorns are a possible species and the word 'unicorn' as used by us is necessarily empty.

These arguments focus on a particular class of expressions—natural kind terms. Putnam, Kripke, and those who accept their conclusions do not hold that all kind terms have non-descriptive meanings. For instance, 'bachelor' is plausibly a term for a social kind, but its extension very well may be fixed by description. We are not nearly as likely to defer to experts about the meaning of 'bachelor' as we are for the meaning of 'pyrite'. And the meaning of 'bachelor' was not plausibly fixed by ostending to a sample bachelor. The Putnam-Kripke arguments are meant to apply to terms for animals, plants, and chemical substances. Natural kind terms might be taken to be semantically special, for instance their semantics might be externalist and name-like, while other kind terms are not name-like and do not have externalist meanings. However, one might also question whether they are really special in this sense. For instance, Wikforss argues that if one combines the view that natural kind terms are semantically special with the view that which kind terms are natural kind terms is only discoverable a posteriori one is committed to view that "there is a category of terms that is special from a semantic point of view, even though identifying this category depends on the development of sophisticated empirical theories, such as contemporary chemistry or evolutionary theory" (2010: 68). She takes it that a view of semantic specialness that requires detailed empirical research is implausible. So, perhaps we should not think that there is something semantically special about natural kind terms, even if there are some kind terms that pick out kinds which are metaphysically special.

Another issue related to natural kinds terms and essences is whether Putnam-Kripke style arguments deliver metaphysical conclusions about kinds having essences. I'll turn to arguments about the metaphysical import of these arguments in §*III*.

C. Slurs and Derogatory Terms

Another class of terms that has been argued to essentialize are slurs and other derogatory terms. Tirrell (2012) analyzes derogatory language used leading up to and during the Rwandan

genocide. She argues that to be a deeply derogatory term, an expression must meet a condition that the negative content is "presumed to convey an essential aspect of the target… and in so doing, must create and enforce hierarchy" (2012: 191). Deeply derogatory terms express something about a target's essence, make differences between groups seem inevitable, and are morally laden. Moreover, if differences are immutable and some are naturally worse than others, this could serve to justify differential treatment and making any supposedly required rehabilitation or change impossible. While Tirrell argues that many forces beyond language are involved in atrocities like genocide, she takes language to play a role. This role is partially played given the way deeply derogatory terms essentialize.

Neufeld argues for an essentialist semantic analysis of slurring expressions. She argues that slurs "are kind terms encoding an "essence" of a social group, which is taken to explain a number of negative features attributed to the group" (2019: 2). On her view someone falls into the extension of a slur, S, for a social group G just in case they have the essence of G and this causes them to have stereotypical negative features of Gs. Since no one has a racial, gender, ethnic, or other essence that causes them to have negative stereotypical features, on Neufeld's account slurs are empty. They are "a species of *failed kind terms*; they are terms which, although introduced with the intention of designating kinds, fail to do so" (2019: 2). Notice the similarities with her argument and Kripke's argument about unicorns. Both Neufeld and Kripke argue that certain terms are empty and fail to designate kinds. The difference is that while Neufeld takes slurs to be intended to designate kinds, fictional kind terms like 'unicorn' were likely not introduced with such intentions (as least supposing they were introduced as terms for fictitious kinds).

D. Nouns and Labels

In the previous two subsections, we saw arguments that certain classes of nouns—slurs and natural kind terms—involve positing essences. We now turn to the broader view that nouns as a lexical category are poised to elicit essentialist thinking. Research has found that children and adults take nouns rather than adjectives or verbs to convey more information about a category (Gelman & Markman 1987; Markman 1989; Gelman & Coley 1990; Waxman 1990; Jaswal & Markman 2002; Walton & Banaji 2004; Carnaghi et al. 2008). In experimental work Markman and Smith (reported in Markman 1989) found that in pairs with an adjectival and a nominal version of an expression, like in 14a and 14b, people took the nominal construction (i.e., 14b) to be stronger and more informative.

14. a. Sam is liberal.
    b. Sam is a liberal.

This has led several psychologists and philosophers to argue that the lexical category *noun* is connected to being a kind and to essentialism (Wierzbicka 1986; Markman 1989; Gelman 2003; Ritchie 2021b). For example, Markman argues that using a noun for a category expresses something more central to the entity's identity, has stronger inductive potential, and provides more essential information "stating what [the entity] is" (1989: 134). Leslie (2017) focuses much of her discussion of essentialism and language on generics, but she suggests that labels more generally might essentialize. Ritchie and Knobe (2020) use linguistic evidence to argue that lexicalized nominal expressions, like "women", are represented as kinds which have members, opening the door for essentialism, while failing to invariantly lead to essentialist thinking. In other work, Ritchie (2021a, 2021b) argues that the semantics for predicate nominals like 14b involves categorizing the subject as a member of the kind and trigger a presupposition that underpins our essentialist biases, whereas predicate adjectives like 14a merely involve an individual being assigned a property. This view too is not specific to particular categories of nouns (e.g., natural

kind terms), but is meant to hold of predicate nominals of the form 'A is an F' in general. If nouns are connected to essentialism, then this suggests that while it is not false that generics, natural kind terms, or slurs essentialize, it is something about nouns rather than, say, slurs that explains the connection between a particular expression and its propensity to essentialize.

III. Broader Connections: Metaphysics, Methodology, and Social Political Projects

In §*II* we saw arguments connecting linguistic constructions, expression types, and lexical categories with essentialism. To conclude, we'll consider broader connections between language and essentialism and issues in metaphysics, methodology, and social political projects.

Essentialist language might be thought to have important metaphysical upshots. For example, one interpretation of Putnam-Kripke arguments about essence and natural kinds terms is that a particular semantic theory delivers answers to metaphysical questions about the essence of persons (e.g., origin essentialism) or natural kinds (e.g., that chemical kinds have microstructural essences). However, Salmon (1979) argues that Kripke's theory of reference does not *deliver* conclusions about kinds or individuals having essences, but rather assumes essentialist theses from the start. Kripke (1980) notes he did not intend to show essentialism followed from a theory of reference.

Research on how humans posit underlying essences has been argued to have import for philosophical methodology. Leslie (2013) argues that cognitive biases related to essence—like the way use of generics and nouns elicits judgments that categories have innate essences, are homogenous, and so on—put pressure on the idea that intuitions are metaphysically illuminating. For example, consider again Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment. Even if one shares Putnam's intuition that Twin Oscar's use of 'water' picks out twin water (XYZ) not water (H_2O),

Leslie asks us to question the force of the argument. This sort of essentialist judgment is ingrained in human cognition from a very early age. Why should one think, she argues, that it tracks the truth about the nature of kinds?

Finally, essentializing language has connections to social-political philosophy and social justice projects. A number of philosophers have argued for linguistic prescriptions based on connections between language and essentialism. These have focused largely on the argument that generics should be avoided given their connections to essentialist thinking and its potential for pernicious effects (Haslanger 2011; Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson 2012; Leslie 2017; Wodak and Leslie 2017; Wodak, Leslie, and Rhodes 2015). If generics increase the propensity for people to take social kinds to have biological essences (e.g., to think there are racial essences) and these lead to dehumanization and prejudice, it is a short step to arguing that social generics should not be used. Moreover, as we saw with the *Tolerate Exceptions* condition, generics are also hard to falsify as they tolerate, sometimes many, exceptions. This is particularly worrisome when considering that generics can be used to express stereotypes. Since generics tolerate exceptions, pointing to exceptions to racial, gender, and other stereotypes might do little to combat them. For reasons like this, we might think social generics ought to be avoided.

Some argue for broader prescriptions against essentializing language. For instance, Leslie suggests that "reducing the use of labels" (i.e., lexicalized nouns) "for racial, ethnic, and religious groups may reduce the extent to which children grow up essentializing these groups" so this strategy should be considered (2017, 420). Dembroff and Wodak (2018) argue we should not use pronouns that have gender features in part as a strategy to avoid gender essentialism.

Other philosophers argue that generics and labels can be part of important social justice projects, so a general prohibition against social generics is too strong (Saul 2017; Ritchie 2019;

Sterken 2020). For example, Saul (2017) argues that generic claims like "boys like pink too" are examples of "generic claims that campaigners for social justice might well want to make, as part of a social critique" (2017, p. 12). Ritchie (2019) argues that generics can be used to accurately describe the systematic nature of structural forms of oppression given the *Non-Accidental Generalization* feature. Ritchie (2021a) argues that the propensity for nouns like 'woman' to elicit essentialist thinking reveals a limitation for anti-essentialist ameliorative projects that aim to change the meaning of terms in order to promote social change (e.g., Haslanger, 2000). Just changing a meaning won't be sufficient to avoid essentialism if nouns as a lexical category are intimately connected to psychological essentialism. However, she does not conclude that this requires eliminating nouns for social categories, but suggests ameliorators must attend to our propensity to essentialize and to other features that affect how pernicious essentialism is.

Language can affect our judgments about essence, making us take categorization to be immutable, inductively potent, explanatory, and so on. We have considered how these judgments might be tied to construction type (i.e., generic generalizations), expressions (i.e., natural kind terms, slurs), and lexical category (i.e., nouns). We concluded by considering some connections philosophers have drawn between essentializing language and metaphysics, methodology, and social-political philosophy. Future research ought to explore these issues further.

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[i] From a freeway sign in Los Angeles before the 2022 Super Bowl.

[ii] I say "can" as some of the constructions called generics do not. For instance, some generics might be true just in virtue of a majority of instances having the feature as in Leslie's example "Barns are red" (Leslie 2008).