

Dogs, Cats, and Heroes. Normative Generics in Political Stereotyping

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1 Introduction

According to Beukeboom (2025:750), “language reflects and maintains social-category stereotypes. When communicating about other people and their behavior, the speaker’s linguistic choices (in both labeling and behavior description) tend to reflect activated social-category stereotypes”. Also Maass & Arcuri (1996:220) emphasise that stereotypes are perhaps inseparably linked to language (see also Stangor & Schaller 1996:11; Kurylo & Reifowitz 2025:20). This raises the question of the nature of the link between linguistic structures and stereotypical categorisation. In this paper, we want to contribute to answering this question. In line with Beehly (2015:676), we claim that stereotypes are expressed by generic sentences about social kinds. In the linguistic literature, such sentences go under various names like “normative generics”, “law-like generics”, or “definitional generics”. However, the aim of this article is not merely to put forward this not particularly novel proposal. We also discuss various types of generic sentences that have been identified in the literature and show how they interact to establish or reinforce stereotypes, i.e., to support the acceptance of normative generics. And we will use two case studies to demonstrate how this mechanism is applied in the field of political communication.

Following Beukeboom’s (2025) perspective, we assume that the lexical meaning of a word is a function of the way the word is used by the speakers, and that the way a word is used within a speech community may well be steeped in prejudices (see also Beaver & Stanley 2023). This holds in particular for words referring to social kinds, typically groups of humans.¹ The notion of a stereotype thus corresponds to a set of properties associated with a given kind (the stereotypical properties). These associations are collaboratively formed in the course of linguistic communication (Beukeboom 2025:752). They come about when speakers have a collective attunement to a linguistic practice, to use the wording of Beaver & Stanley (2023).

Subscribing to the view that stereotypes form part of the implicit background knowledge that underlies linguistic communication, we posit that aspects of a stereotype linked to a kind can be made explicit by means of generic sentences. This is summarised in the following quote.

A generic sentence is, from the speaker’s point of view, the expression of a stereotypical assumption about a kind, and, with respect to the hearer, a request to revise, update, or simply retrieve certain stereotypical assumptions. (Geurts 1985:251)

Examples (1) are cases in point (Bartmiński 2009:186).

- (1) a. *Germans are hard-working.*
- b. *Germans are pedantic.*

¹But note that also animals and artefacts can be subject to prejudices, just think of the properties that many people wrongly assign to wolves or sharks, or even machines (“SUVs kill”), let alone certain new forms of computational systems (Bender & Hanna 2025).

There is nothing that forces us to assume that the way people label entities and describe their behaviour must match the way the entities are like in reality. Consequently, it would be a fallacy to assume that generic sentences expressing stereotypes like (1) would refer to particular people and their actual behaviour. Instead, it seems more plausible to consider these sentences to be about an abstract category, namely the social kind Germans, and stereotypical properties that this kind is associated with. Generics may match the factual reality, but do not have to do so to count as accurate statements.

To sum up, stereotype knowledge comprises the knowledge that people have about what kinds of entities there are in their world, and about how members of these kinds are like, including their behaviour. People who belong to the same community of practice will have considerable overlap in their stereotypical knowledge.

Researchers often emphasise that stereotype knowledge is a crucial informational resource that enables us to quickly and efficiently interpret a new situation when we have insufficient information. Indeed, the benefits of socially shared stereotypical knowledge cannot be overestimated in view of the existential condition of life: “The living organism must [...] be able to anticipate, to some extent, the further course of events. It must be prepared for what is to come, to be able to escape its own predators and make its own prey.” (Barwise & Perry 1983:31). In view of this precarious living situation, stereotypes are helpful in generating “generic expectancies” (Beukeboom 2025:752) that equip us with cues about what one should and should not do. This brings the notion of stereotypes close to the notion of a norm, as “[n]orms, especially social norms, have a guiding force on behavior and action” (Hesni 2024:4). However, not every generic sentence expresses a stereotype.

Research in linguistics revealed that there are categorially different types of generics sentences. Only so-called normative generics convey stereotypical assumptions. In addition to normative generics, there are descriptive generics. Unlike the former, the latter express generalisations necessarily tied to the existence of actual facts supporting the generalisation.²

In this paper, we propose a stratified theory of generalisation according to which the acceptance of a normative generic sentence implies the acceptance of a corresponding descriptive generic. This, we will argue, is the reason why launching descriptive generics is a reasonable strategy for political agents to back up normative generics in order to create or reinforce stereotypes.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we will briefly recapitulate the typology of generic sentences that has been more or less established in the theoretical literature. We will emphasise a fundamental division into normative generic sentences on the one hand, and episode-based generic sentences on the other hand, the latter being subdivided into statistical generics and striking property generics. In Section 3, we will elaborate on the already mentioned special status of normative generic sentences as explications of our generalised background knowledge. Based on this, we will then argue that statistical generics and striking property generics, which we summarise under the term episode-based generics, often underpin the acceptance of normative generics, and that they therefore play a central role in political communication. In Section 4, we will present two case studies. In one case, the political actor brings a striking property generic into play to justify the acceptance of a normative generic in his interest. The other case illustrates the creation of a statistical generic for the purpose of establishing or, rather, consolidating a normative generic. Section 5 summarises our work and draws a conclusion.

²The linguistic distinction between descriptive generics and normative generics roughly corresponds to the distinction that Kurylo & Reifowitz (2025:5) draw between generalisations and stereotypes.

2 Types of generics

According to what has been said so far, shared generic knowledge implies shared acceptance of generics. Here are some examples of generic sentences that are widely accepted to express valid guidelines of social life (which does not imply that the authors of this paper accept them as well).

- (2) a. *Germans love rules.*
- b. *Russians drink vodka.*
- c. *Gentlemen open doors for ladies.*
- d. *Boys don't cry.*

It seems intuitive to assume that generic sentences are used to “state that a law or a principle of some sort ‘is in force’ at a certain time” (Dahl 1975:103). However, the linguistics of generic sentences is more nuanced than that. The bare plural generics under (2) *may* in fact refer to laws or law-like principles, but they need not. They may also be read as inductive generics (Carlson 1995), meaning that they express a generalisation over the way members of the respective groups happen to behave in the world (Cohen 2001).³ The generics in (2) are thus ambiguous between two generic readings. (3) is a good example to explain the difference.⁴

- (3) *Humans are competitive.*

In one interpretation, (3) expresses that humans are competitive by nature. In the other interpretation, people often exhibit competitive behaviour not due to their human nature, but due to external all-embracing economic circumstances that prevail “accidentally” and that scaffold their way of life in a capitalist society. According to the first interpretation of the generic sentence, there is a biological law which states that humans cannot but behave competitively towards each other. According to the second interpretation of the generic, the generalisation can be statistically induced from frequent behaviour (which, however, could have been different, in principle at least).

The interpretive difference illustrated here with respect to (3) goes by various names. Dahl (1975) distinguishes “nomic or law-like statements” from “accidental generalizations” (which he does not count as generics, see footnote 3). Carlson (1995) discusses “rules-and-regulations approaches” to generics on the one hand and “inductive approaches” on the other, ending in saying that “[i]t may well be possible that there is no single successful analysis of the domain of generics *in toto*, and that the domain must be split for the sake of arriving at tractable semantic analyses” (Carlson 1995:237). Greenberg (2003) speaks of “in-virtue-of generics” as opposed to “descriptive generics”.

A thorough discussion of the different classifications and terminology that have been proposed in the literature on generics would go beyond the scope of this paper, and we refer the reader to synopses such as Krifka et al. (1995); Leslie & Lerner (2016); Cohen (2016); Nickel (2017). Here, we will focus on the two types of generics mentioned above, adding to them a third type that has been brought into the picture by Leslie (2007, 2008). In this paper,

³To be fair, on Dahl’s (1975) account inductive generics would not count as generics, but merely as “accidental generalizations” (Dahl 1975:100). Here we follow the terminology of Krifka et al. (1995) who define the phenomenon of genericity as “propositions which do not express specific episodes or isolated facts, but instead report a kind of general property, that is, report a regularity which summarizes groups of particular episodes or facts” (Krifka et al. 1995:2).

⁴See also Nickel’s (2017:451) discussion of *Kindergarten teachers are women*.

we call these three categories as follows: (i) normative (definitional) generics; (ii) statistical (inductive) generics; (iii) striking property generics.

In the following, we will briefly introduce the types of generics (i) – (iii), and propose a hierarchy among them. Jumping ahead, the claim will be that statistical generics and striking property generics back up normative generics. After that, at the end of this paper we will present two political attempts to establish normative generics by launching statistical and striking property generics. “Launching” thereby means providing apparent facts to suggest the truth of statistical or striking property generics. Our study can be understood as an examination of stereotyping as a mode of political communication, that is, as the public articulation of generalised beliefs serving the stereotyper’s own objectives. (Beeghly 2015:682).

2.1 Normative generics

As noted above, the generic sentences in (2) do not unequivocally refer to “a law or a principle of some sort”. They can also be read as statistical generics. There is a class of generics, however, for which it holds that they can only express law-like generalisations.⁵ This is the class of indefinite singular generics. According to the analysis of Cohen (2001), these sentences are used to predicate a rule that it is in-effect.

- (4) a. *A German loves rules.*
 b. *A Russian drinks vodka.*
 c. *A gentleman opens doors for ladies.*
 d. *A strong boy doesn’t cry.*

In recent years, the term “normative generics” has been suggested for English generics that have an indefinite singular subject constituent (e.g. Hesni 2024). The normative generics in (4) are most likely about social kinds, but normative generics can of course also be about natural kinds.⁶

- (5) a. *A chanterelle is bright warm yellow in colour.*
 b. *A hen lays eggs.*
 c. *A shark has a big dorsal fin.*
 d. *A lion roars.*

(5) shows some examples of generics that report on rules about natural kinds. However, the divide between social and natural kinds is not always easy to draw. Take, for example, (4a) and (4b). Racists’ encyclopedias would prefer to consider Germans and Russians to constitute two natural kinds. And whether (4d) is about a social kind or about a natural kind is a matter of much debate. The more conservative view considers *boys* to refer to a natural kind: to be a boy is to be a non-adult human whose biological sex is male. Others would say that *boys* is rather a social kind, a socially constructed identity correlated with, but not determined by, biological sex.

⁵Krifka (2013) argues that this is, in fact, not the case, i.e. that there are indefinite singular descriptive generics; we will pick this up below.

⁶In these cases the attribute “normative” might feel a bit mistaken, which is why the term “definitional”, which we introduce later on below, is maybe the more appropriate choice.

As the naming suggests, normative generics are about what ought to be the case if things are in order. Things will be in order if individuals act the way one would expect them to act given what kind of individuals they are. Normative generics, therefore, predicate “inherent properties”: properties that have a principled connection to a given kind (Prasada & Dillingham 2006). In the case of a normative generic the “given kind” is the one named by the subject nominal.

Members of a kind share something that one might presume to call their essence (very much in the sense of Aristotle, see Haward, Carey & Prasada 2021). They have common properties not because of outer circumstances that happen to hold in the world, but because of their being members of the kind. Properties that an individual member of a kind has by virtue of being a member of said kind are called k-properties (Prasada & Dillingham 2006; Prasada 2016). For an individual to be a member of a kind, in other words, means to be associated with the set of k-properties which individuate the kind.⁷

Normative generics are definitional. Explicating one of the k-properties of a kind, each normative generic partly defines what an individual has to be like to fall under a kind-naming predicate delivered by the subject expression (Krifka 2013). In virtue of this, normative generics can be used to negotiate what is fake or real, witness (6). Below we will pick up on the function of adjectives like *true* and *real* (as for the second example, see Bartmiński 2009:185ff.).

- (6) a. *A real chanterelle is bright warm yellow in colour.*
 b. *A true German is hard-working.*

In sum, accepted normative generics record valid background assumptions about the rules and regulations holding within a social community of practice. This explains why they support formal explanations of the sort exemplified in (7).

- (7) a. *This mushroom is bright warm yellow in colour because it is a chanterelle.*
 b. *Michael loves rules because he is German.*

2.2 Statistical generics

Statistical generics are sentences that report on generalisations that can be drawn from how individuals behave in a given world, or how they happen to be like (i.a. Krifka et al. 1995). Here are some examples.

- (8) a. *Cars have radios.*
 b. *Foreign language teachers are female.*

The validity of the predications in (8) is not due to principled connections holding between the kind (car; foreign language teacher) and the property (to have a radio; to be female). Instead, the generalisation is induced on the basis of empirical observation. (8) shows statistical generics, accepted only if sufficiently many occurrences support the expressed generalisation. This sort of generics is sometimes also called “inductive generics” (Carlson

⁷This does not preclude the possibility of accidental circumstances which let some (or even every) member of the kind lack this or that k-property. A particular lion may be three-legged without questioning the fact that the kind LION “projects” (to use Prasada’s wording) the k-property of being four-legged. Properties that the individual has not because of kind membership, but for accidental reasons, like the being three-legged of the lion just talked about, are called t-properties (Prasada & Dillingham 2006, 2009).

1995) or, as we will see below in some detail, “descriptive generics” (Greenberg 2003; Krifka 2013).

- (9) a. *Israelis speak English.*
b. *Germans speak German.*

Cohen (2004) provides (9a), which conveys that “wherever you go in Israel, whichever group of Israeli society you associate with, a member of this community will be likely to speak English”.

We added the generic sentence (9b), which may mean the same thing adopted to Germany and Germans. We added it because it lends itself easily to a normative construal. The normative interpretation of it is part of the logic behind the fact that anyone who wants to be naturalised⁸ in Germany must take a language test to prove that they have sufficient knowledge of the German language. We see from this, once again, that while indefinite singular generics allow for normative readings only, bare plural generics allow for statistical readings and, if framed in the right context, also normative readings.

The meaning of statistical generics is usually modelled by postulating a silent quantifier in the semantic structure of the sentence. The meaning of sentence (10a), for example, can be analysed as in (10b), involving the generic quantifier Gen. Accordingly, the sentence states that in all situations in which there is an Israeli and in which the felicity conditions for speaking English are met (the latter is taken care of by the variable “C”, see Chierchia 1995:195), the Israeli will speak English (for discussion, see Krifka et al 1995:30ff.).

- (10) a. *Israelis speak English.*
b. *Gen x,s [*Israeli(x) & C(x,s)*][*speak English(x,s)*]*

Statistical generics express connections that are not “principled”, but merely prevalent amongst instances of a kind, e.g., between cars and radios (Prasada et al. 2013). Unlike normative generics, they do not support formal explanations:

- (11) a. *??This car has a radio because it is a car.*
b. *??This teacher is female because she teaches Spanish.*

Now compare the following two examples.

- (12) a. *?This Israeli speaks English because she is an Israeli.*
b. *This German speaks German because she is a German.*

The sentences appear to sound better than their counterparts in (11). The reason is that they are more easily interpretable as normative generics. Only normative generics support formal explanations.

The generics in (2) can all be read either as normative generics, or as statistical generics. If we take them to express statistical generics, we may falsify them by providing empirical counter-evidence. What we needed to do was show that most Germans, in fact, hate following rules. Then we would have proved (2a), understood as a statistical statement, to be wrong. Thus, due to their statistical nature, statistical generics are in principle falsifiable by counting instances. We will have to keep this in mind for what follows.

2.3 Striking property generics

⁸Note the verb *naturalised* in the context of our discussion.

Striking property generics (Leslie 2007, 2008 2013) form yet another class of generic sentences, exemplified by (13). These generics seem to escape a quantificational treatment because “[s]triking property generics (e.g., “sharks bite swimmers”) are true even though only a tiny minority of instances have the property” (Prasada et al. 2013:405).

- (13) a. *Dogs maul children.*
 b. *Muslims commit knife attacks.*

With respect to generics such as these, Leslie (2017:396) suggests the following.

I suggest that the generics above are special in that their predicates express properties that we are strongly interested in avoiding. If even just a few members of a kind possess a property that is harmful or dangerous, then a generic that attributes that property to the kind is likely to be judged true. [...] [O]ur basic way of dealing with dangerous or harmful information involves rapidly generalising this information to the salient kind or category. We do not wait around to see what percentage of tigers eat people before drawing a general conclusion — even a single instance may be enough for us to conclude that tigers eat people. It is not hard to imagine the evolutionary benefits of such a disposition, since the costs of undergeneralizing such information are potentially huge. (Leslie 2017:396)

We learn that striking property generics convey “dangerous and harmful information”, so harmful indeed that a single act (or some such acts) is generalised to the social group the actor is associated with. Their acceptance as an adequate description of the world is driven by fear of the drastic consequences of the act.

As a consequence of the mechanism⁹ of “rapidly generalizing this information to the salient kind”, the generalisations expressed by striking property generics feed stereotypes and often racist ideologies, as when members of the group are believed to be disposed to act the terrible way (Langton, Haslanger & Anderson 2012).

- (14) a. *Dogs maul children.* → *Every dog is a (potential) child mauler.*
 b. *Muslims commit knife attacks.* → *Every Muslim is a (potential) knife attacker.*

Abstracting a bit, we may summarise that the generalisation expressed by a striking property generic is licenced by the existence of a real event that has profound implications for the prestige of the (members of the) kind to which the initiator of the event belongs, or is claimed to belong. Note that the effect on the prestige of the relevant kind may be not only negative, as in the above examples, but also positive. Although rare, there are striking property generics that do not express properties that we have an interest in avoiding. We could call them shining property generics.

- (15) a. *Parrots can talk.*
 b. *Dolphins rescue humans from drowning.*
 c. *Bulgarians are good weightlifters.*¹⁰
 d. *Dutchmen are good sailors.*¹¹

The mechanism of rapidly generalising episodic information to the kind is, obviously, driven by strong emotions. In examples like (13), it is fear and anger. With respect to the examples

⁹Leslie (2017) calls this mechanism the original sin of cognition, thereby emphasising its importance.

¹⁰Example from Cohen (1999).

¹¹Example from Krifka et al. (1995).

in (15), the emotion is much more difficult to grasp. It seems as though we love to believe in reasons to admire certain biological species or social kinds for extraordinary skills.¹²

3 On the pragmatics of normative generics

Having distinguished between three types of generics, in Section 3.1 we will now move on to point out the special status of normative generics. It is the normative generics accepted by us that form our everyday theory about the world (not to say our ideology), enabling us “to anticipate [...] the further course of events” (Barwise & Perry, see above), thus guiding expectations. In Section 3.2, building on Krifka’s (2013) distinction between descriptive and definitional generics, we will argue for a levelled approach to generics. Generics can report on the regularities that hold in the factual world, thus describing it. But generics can also be about the regularities that are encoded in (the words of the) language that may be used to describe the world. Importantly, these two sorts of regularities do not need to match. In Section 3.3, finally, we will address what we call strategic communication, i.e. linguistic strategies with the illocution of providing arguments for normative generics in one’s political interest. Even though the two sources from which linguistic generalisations can be drawn, (i) knowledge about the world and (ii) knowledge about the knowledge about the world as it is encoded in words do not match, as said above, there is a connection between the two, which we argue is exploited in manipulative language. The strategy is to purposely manipulate (i) in order to manipulate (ii).

3.1 Normative generics are special

In this section, we point out that striking property generics and statistical generics have something in common that sets them apart from normative generics: both not only imply, but entail the existence of real-world episodes. The utterance of a striking property generic will work only in connection with silent reference to a few, or in the extreme case, even only one “striking” episode that has taken place at some time in the past or is taking place at present. Similarly, statistical generics necessarily build on sufficiently many episodes (whereby these episodes need not be striking, but may be very ordinary) that are known or assumed to have taken place. Otherwise, without such a set of supporting episodes, there would be no base to induce the generalisation. In short, the acceptability of striking property and statistical generics depends on events that have occurred and are therefore available as direct evidence licensing the generic claim.

The fact that striking property generics and statistical generics are directly tied to real-world episodes sets them apart from normative generics. Normative generics are different because they don’t always require instances in the world talked about for their acceptance. To see this, consider (16).

- (16) a. *Perpetual motion machines perform work indefinitely, but no one has ever built a perpetual motion machine.*
 b. *#Yawarese teachers are female, but no one has ever taught Yawarese.*

¹²Not only living beings can be subject to striking property assignments. A famous example in the literature on generics is *Typhoons arise in this part of the Pacific* (Krifka et al. 1995; Cohen 2020). It is famous for allowing two interpretations. It may be read as a statement about typhoons or as a statement about this part of the Pacific. We may say that in the former case it will be a normative generic (to arise in this part of the Pacific is a property principally connected to the members of the kind typhoon), whereas in the latter case it will be a striking property generic (this part of the Pacific is disposed to give birth to typhoons and, therefore, dangerous).

c. #*Yellow sharks attack bathers, but no one has ever been attacked by a yellow shark.*

We saw above that bare plural generics allow for statistical as well as for normative readings. In (16), however, due to the *but*-continuations, statistical interpretations are ruled out. There is just no data to induce the generalisation from. What about the second option? (16a) clearly lends itself to a normative interpretation. This illustrates what we want to point out here: the felicity of normative generics does not hinge on the existence of events instantiating the generalisation. As for (16b) and (16c), we would argue that these likewise allow for a normative reading, which is, however, in need of quite strong contextual support (see below). Therefore, we marked them as pragmatically degraded.

Although it is probably true that by far most normative generics express generalisations that correlate with real-world instances, (16a) tells us that this is not a must. In normative generics, an existential claim concerning instances is no semantic entailment, but a pragmatic implicature. It could be argued that the implicature is triggered because the speaker, by uttering a normative generic, asserts the validity of a rule (Cohen 2001), and if rules are the “causal forces behind episodic instances” (Carlson 1995), asserting a valid rule will make sense only if there are instances following the rule. This invites the implicature that there are episodic instances supporting the rule. Normally, we would expect such instances to be instances of the real world. As (16a) shows, however, this does not need to be the case, the instances may also populate hypothetical (e.g. science fiction) worlds different from the real one. This makes it possible to cancel said implicature.

If we replace the subjects of the sentences in (16) by indefinite singular nominals (and drop the *but*-part), we will get the items in (17). We already saw that, if such sentences have generic readings, this should be normative ones.¹³

- (17) a. *A perpetual motion machine performs work indefinitely.*
 b. #*A Yawarese teacher is female.*
 c. #*A yellow shark attacks bathers.*

While (17a) sounds perfect without reservations, (17b) and (17c) are somewhat degraded as generics. They will be acceptable only on the condition that we construe a context that introduces a valid rule of the appropriate type. With respect to (17b), this would have to be a social rule, e.g., that it is culturally required that the Yawarese language must be taught by a woman.¹⁴ Inasmuch as *shark* is a natural kind and *yellow shark* a subkind thereof, a rule that would make (17c) acceptable would have to be a biological rule. The sentence would gain a plausible normative reading if somehow, due to their kind-specific DNA for instance, yellow sharks can be expected to share properties with other shark kinds, members of which are reported to have attacked bathers. If that was known about yellow sharks, (17c) could well be rated as true, even if, factually, yellow sharks have never hunted bathers until now (maybe because their natural habitat is far from the coast).

Let us take stock. What all generics have in common is that they express generalisations (Krifka et al. 1995:2; Carlson 1995:224). But while striking property generics and statistical generics licence their generalisations by referring the hearer to empirical evidence, normative

¹³Krifka (2013) presents examples to show that indefinite singular generics do have descriptive generic interpretations, one being *A banana that has been sat on by a rhinoceros is flat*. But is this, whatever it is, really a descriptive generic? Note that the sentence holds true even if there never ever was any rhino sitting on a banana. Another example is *A trout can be caught by many different methods*. We have nothing substantial to say about these sentences, except for adding the observation that indefinite singular subjects are seemingly always connected to the patient role relative to an action (here: sitting on something and catching something).

¹⁴It should be clear that assuming such a rule in the background would also rescue (16b).

generics do not need to be licensed in that way. They express purely theoretical claims, so to speak. If something is a *P*, it will normally be *Q*. Whether or not there has in fact ever been a *P* that is *Q* is not said by a normative generic. What then is the communicative function of a normative generic? Before answering this question, we note so far that normative generics have a special status among generic sentences. By the way, the very fact that there is a grammatical construction specialised in expressing normative generics, i.e. indefinite singular generics, can by itself be counted as an argument for treating normative generics as an outstanding category.¹⁵

3.2 Instructions to act

We saw that not every combination of a nominal and a predicate that makes a good statistical generic also makes a good normative generic. The sentences in (18), for instance, do not seem to be good as normative generics.

- (18) a. #*A dog mauls children.*
 b. #*A foreign language teacher is female.*

We also observed that otherwise problematic normative generics such as (17b) and (17c) can be “rescued” when they are framed within an appropriate context. All this suggests that normative generics require very specific licensing conditions to be met. The aim of this section is to identify these conditions.

Example (19a) is discussed in Hesni (2024:3220), who observes that the addition of the modifier *strong* to the otherwise questionable generic (19a) leads to full acceptability, see (19b).¹⁶

- (19) a. ??*A boy doesn't cry.*
 b. *A strong boy doesn't cry.*

Hesni (2024:3227) argues with respect to (19a) that the generic can be acceptable, but only if understood as saying that the “x should not be *called* a boy if x cries” (emphasis in the original). The utterance of (19a) conveys an “instruction to treat boys [...] as though they don't cry” (Hesni 2021:12591). Hesni's observation is extendable to other data. Take, for example, (17c). Given the background rule of the Yawarese culture noted above, the sentence can be read as a generic statement expressing that x should not be *called* a Yawarese teacher if x is not female (even if x actually teaches that language). What this shows is that, if we construe an appropriate context, such indefinite singular generics can be read as instructions, which is what normative generics seem to require for being accepted. For example, as an instruction to accept someone as a Yawarese language teacher only if that person is female.

The contextual effect emerges nicely in the following example from Cohen (2001, 2020). While (20a) is questionable as a normative generic, (20b) no longer is.¹⁷

- (20) a. **A king is generous.*
 b. *Sire, please don't send her to the axe. Remember, a king is generous!*

¹⁵But see Krifka (2013) who questions this apparent fact.

¹⁶The judgement “??” is taken over from Hesni (2024). We would have preferred “#” as indication of pragmatic markedness, but the difference in notation should not play a decisive role.

¹⁷Again, the judgement “*” is taken over from Cohen (2001). And again, we would prefer to use “#” instead.

(20b) is an appeal to the king. The rhetoric used by the speaker can be outlined as follows: “People consider kings to act generously. If you, my king, send her to the axe, you will act to the contrary, and your people could rethink accepting you as king.”

Hesni’s proposal is, thus, to view the utterances of normative generics as instructions to act in accordance with the rule that the normative generic expresses. In a similar vein, Cohen (2020:55) speaks of indefinite singular generics as “action triggers”.

Due to the “called-component” in their meaning (recall the quote from above), Hesni (2024) speaks of normative generics as “meta-linguistic” (or “meta-semantic” in Hesni 2021:222) constructions. The metalinguistic character of this type of generic statement has already been worked out by Krifka (2013), who draws a contrast between generics the truth of which is directly tied to world-conditions on the one hand, and generics that demand only an indirect tie to world-conditions on the other hand. The former he calls “descriptive generics”, and the latter “definitional generics”.

Descriptive generics make generalizations about patterns that appear in the world; definitional generics restrict the language used to describe the world. (Krifka 2013:374)

Krifka’s idea is that descriptive generics, roughly corresponding to what we call statistical generics in this paper, are used to make assertions about the world, while definitional generics, corresponding to our normative generics, are not, or at least not directly used in that mode. By uttering a descriptive generic, the speaker presupposes shared knowledge with the hearer about the language used and asserts, by means of their common language, that some fact is holding true in the world of the interlocutors (or in some hypothetical world into which the interlocutors immerse themselves).

Being descriptive, the meaning of a descriptive generic may or may not correspond to the facts actually holding in the world being described. In case of correspondence, the sentence will count as true relative to the world. Thus, descriptive generics have a truth-conditional meaning. In that respect, they are like episodic sentences. The difference between the descriptive generic (21a) and the descriptive episodic¹⁸ (21b), for instance, is merely that the former reports on a generalisation statistically backed up by actual states of affairs, while the latter claims a specific state of affairs to hold in the world (an exceptional state, if both sentences were true).

(21) a. *Foreign language teachers are female.*

b. *My Spanish teacher is a man.*

With definitional/normative generics, the situation is entirely different according to Krifka (2013). Here, the speaker presupposes shared knowledge with the hearer about the state of affairs holding in the world in which they live and, against this background, asserts something about the language they both use to talk about their world. Shared knowledge about the world includes information about what kinds of entities there are and how these kinds are like (generic information), as well as information about how instances of these kinds acted or what happened to them (episodic information). Together, these two sorts of information make up what one can call world knowledge.

Presupposing shared world knowledge, the speaker utters a definitional generic not to describe the world, but rather to describe the linguistic labels available for describing the world. Definitional generics are thus used to talk about the kind terms of the language, predicating on which properties members of the kind must have in order to be properly

¹⁸It should have become clear that “descriptive episodic” is a pleonasm.

characterised by the respective kind term. They express, in other words, what an individual is expected to be like to qualify as a member of the kind, or to use Hesni's wording: what an individual is expected to be like to deserve being *called* by the kind name. From this we may derive two core usages of definitional/normative generics.

The first usage purpose of a normative generic (we randomly go for this terminology) is to provide a new defining characteristic of the members of the kind designated by the subject term. Typical examples can be found in encyclopaedias (5a) or in child-directed speech (Krifka 2013). Here, the motivation of the speaker is sharing personal knowledge with the hearer: You don't know that a *P* is *Q*? I tell you that a *P* is *Q*. From now on treat a *P* as though it is *Q*.

The second purpose for which normative generics are frequently used is to *remind* the hearer of a defining property. In this case, the speaker's motivation is to correct an observed or expected action of the hearer by pointing out a discrepancy between the action and the applicable norms. A paradigm example for this is (20b). The king is reminded ("remember") of the fact that kings should be generous, and that the act of sending her to the axe runs counter to this: You act as if a *P* is *Q*, but a *P* is not *Q*. I tell you that a *P* is *Q'* instead. You should adjust your behaviour accordingly, better act as if *P* is *Q'*.

In this regard, consider also (22).

(22) *A Spanish teacher speaks Spanish.*

The normative generic (22) has a flavour of triviality around it. This is arguably due to the fact that the pieces of information that the speaker presupposes almost fully determine the rule expressed by the generic sentence. Our knowledge about the world includes the propositions that there is a language called "Spanish", that there are people teaching other people languages, and that speaking a language is a prerequisite for teaching it. With these propositions considered true as part of one's background knowledge, one cannot but agree with what is expressed by (22). If the purpose of uttering a definitional generic is to restrict the applicability of the kind term (Krifka 2013, recall the quote from above)¹⁹, then the restriction of the kind term *Spanish teacher* that is being proposed in (22) will be rather uncontroversial; uttering the sentence is like preaching to the choir. Understood as a reminder, however, (22) loses its un informativity.

(23) *I don't understand why you want Peter to teach the Spanish course. Remember, a Spanish teacher speaks Spanish.*

In order to understand the function of uttering definitional/normative generics, one has to reflect upon the very basics of linguistic communication. It is probably true that conveying information about the world is the main function of language, but one should be aware of the fact that this function can only be maintained under certain conditions. An important prerequisite in this sense is that the language categories must interface with the categories of the world.

The interface between linguistic and worldly categories is established not least by the fact that natural languages provide kind terms, i.e. labels for naming world categories. Every kind term can be used as a predicate for describing a different aspect of the world.²⁰ Yet which

¹⁹In the words of Hesni (2024:3227), "[a] normative generic assertion of 'An F is G' is a proposal to restrict the usage of 'F' to things with property G".

²⁰An immediate qualification is in order, because there are of course cases of homonymy where two kind terms have the same set of instances (*orca* and *sword whale*, etc.). Similarity with slurs (e.g. *krauts*) and their "neutral" counterparts (*Germans*), which have identical extensions, but different descriptions.

label is usable for which world aspect is, in principle at least, a matter of permanent negotiation among speakers. It is here where utterances of normative generics become relevant, because normative generics name like aspects of the world (kinds of entities) and define their mode of likeness (the k-properties that the respective kind projects).

The negotiation of which normative generics are to be accepted is tied to the consequences, or perlocutions, that the utterance of a certain normative generic implies. This applies to all normative generics, not least to normative generics about social kinds, i.e., generics that convey stereotypes.

3.3 Strategic communication

We saw in the previous section that when we are talking about the factual world, the usage constraints of the words we employ for talking are presupposed, together with the kinds named by these words. This has an important consequence. It means that, by calling an entity *x* by a word *N*, we implicitly assign to *x* all the properties associated with the kind identified by *N*.

Knowing all the restrictions for “correctly” (i.e. in accordance with the social practice of one’s speech communities) using the word *raven* means having a standard for checking whether a given entity should linguistically count, in the eyes of the speech community, as a raven; knowing all the referential restrictions of the word *boy* means having a standard for checking whether an individual counts as a boy; etc. Let us call the standard for measuring whether an entity may correctly be called an *N* the kind knowledge associated with the word *N*. The restrictions on the use of *N* expressible by a normative generic are the properties that together constitute the kind knowledge associated with *N*. They are the “k-properties” in the terminology of Prasada & Dillingham (2006), Prasada (2016).²¹ The k-properties “projected” (to use Prasada’s terminology) by a kind may be explicated by normative generics:

- (24) a. *A raven is black.*
 b. *A raven is a bird.*
 c. *A raven is intelligent.*
 d. ...

In a discourse situation in which the kind knowledge associated with a noun *N* is under debate, the speaker might want to add a “normatively flavoured adjective” (Hesni 2024:3321) to the noun for the sake of unequivocally marking their utterance as a normative generic in order to point out that their utterance is about the proper use of *N*.

- (25) a. *A real raven is black.*
 b. *A true boy doesn’t cry.*

The predicate *real raven* characterises the set of all those individuals that are properly characterised by the predicate *raven*. The first sentence above expresses that all individuals that are properly called a raven will be black. By the same token, the second sentence expresses that all individuals properly characterised as boys will not cry. Whether or not you accept these statements as true depends on the structure of your personal kind knowledge (or:

²¹Here, of course, the question arises as to whether the totality of k-properties associated with the kind named by a noun exhausts the set of restrictions on the use of the noun. We assume here that it does, but we admit that this is, in fact, an open question.

mindset). For those who accept (25b), the above example (19b) should also be acceptable. The equivalence arises due to the presupposed truth of (26).

(26) *A true boy is strong.*

By ruling out a plain descriptive understanding of the generic, “[t]he adjective *true* plays a key role in the mechanism of stereotyping concepts” (Bartmiński 2009:186). Like its cognate *real*, it operates on the fact that for every kind there is a set of k-properties, each of which partially defines what it means to be a member of the kind. If such an adjective accompanies the noun, its semantic impact will be to emphasise that k-properties are critical for kind membership. Of course, a language would be of low value if its kind terms could be used only for individuals that meet *all* of the k-properties associated with the kind. If speakers stopped calling a dog a dog because it lost a leg, or a raven a raven because it is white, or a boy a boy because he cried, or a person of German nationality a German because she does not speak German, their language would lose much of its communicative power. Nevertheless, there is a “hidden language” behind everyone’s language that pictures an idealised model according to which, maybe, every dog has four legs, every raven is black, every boy is strong, and every German speaks German. The rules, or norms, or stereotypical assumptions (Geurts 1985), or meaning postulates (Carnap 1952), of this “hidden language” can be made visible by normative generics.

Now let us bring in the political dimension of normative generics. Once an entity *x* in the world is identified by us as a member of a kind, we will, unless there is explicit information to the contrary, expect *x* to satisfy *all* of the k-properties projected by the kind, and we will adjust our behaviour towards *x* in accordance to the expectations following from this, i.e. we will treat *x* as though it actually has all the k-properties. From this it follows that, if one wanted to impact on the behaviour of people, one could try to impact on the set of normative generics that people accept. We will call attempts to achieve changes in the set of accepted normative generics “strategic communication”. Normative generics play a central role in strategic communication because they document the properties a kind member has to satisfy for qualifying as a member of the kind.

If I want to influence someone’s behaviour in relation to something, I should influence the kind knowledge associated with the word that names the “something”. Just how to do that? Let us have an example.

A mushroom identification book provides criteria as to whether I should call the mushroom I have found in the forest a *champignon* or a *death cap*. Concluding that the correct name for my mushroom is *death cap* (*Amanita phalloides*) is tantamount to concluding that it is a member of the kind *DEATH CAP*. Having identified its kind, I may further inform myself about its nature, i.e. about the k-properties that death caps generally have. I will hopefully learn that the mushroom is deadly, and I will be careful not to eat it.

Now imagine that for some reason you want people to eat death caps. What would you have to do? You would have to erase the property of being deadly from the list of kind properties associated with the word *death cap*. If you managed to associate the word *death cap* with the meaning component *edible*, you would probably cause mushroom poisoning. Similarly, if you manage to associate the word *immigrant* with the meaning component *dangerous*, you will trigger a hostile behaviour of the people in your speech community towards immigrants. If you manage to associate the word *Russian soldier* with the meaning component *hero*, you can increase the number of those who volunteer for military service in the Russian army.

The difference between the examples is simply that there is probably no one who until now thought that to be edible was a k-property of the kind *DEATH CAP*, whereas there are people

who are known to subscribe to the view that immigrants are dangerous, and there are people for whom Russian soldiers are heroes.

So the question is: How to get other people to change their minds with respect to death caps, immigrants, or Russian soldiers? How to make them try deadly mushrooms, rage against immigrants, or join the army? You could just announce the following normative generics.

- (27) a. *A death cap is edible.*
 b. *An immigrant is dangerous.*
 c. *A Russian soldier is a hero.*

The problem for you is that many would not believe you, rejecting (27) as plainly wrong, because they know that death caps are in fact dangerous, that immigrants are in fact grateful to be included in the society they arrived to, and that it takes in fact a lot of violence to get soldiers to throw themselves in the battle. Therefore, in order to convince the audience that the sentences in (27) are true statements, you would need to provide evidence. Yet evidence, as we pointed out in the previous sections, is semantically connected to *descriptive* generics.

- (28) a. *Death caps are edible.*
 b. *Immigrants are dangerous.*
 c. *Russian soldiers are heroes.*

Descriptive generics was our cover term for episode-based generics, i.e. statistical and striking property generics. These generics talk about the world. They will be considered as true if the world offers sufficiently much data in support of the generalisation expressed. Providing evidence thus means, in the first place, providing data points in support of the truth of a *descriptive* generic. The path to establishing normative generics thus leads via reference to worldly conditions, episodes, that make descriptive generics true.

Let us focus on (28a): How can that generic be accepted as expressing a true statement? There are basically two possibilities. The first is that the speaker knows of episodes unknown to the hearer, i.e. of sufficiently many episodes about people having eaten death caps and recommending doing so as well. This situation is, of course, highly unlikely (from the point of view of our world knowledge at least). Yet there is a second option. The speaker may make up such episodes by telling *stories* about people who enjoyed eating death caps. This was a constructed scenario. In the following, we will now introduce two real cases where stories about episodes have been made up concerning (28b) and (28c).

We propose that one important way of manipulating public opinion proceeds in two steps. It begins with telling stories in order to provide the episodes that are needed to licence *descriptive* (episode-based) generics, in order to then, in the second step, use the existence of the accepted descriptive generic as an argument for to accept a *normative* generic. Generating arguments for accepting normative generics is at the heart of strategic communication (or propaganda), because a normative generic, if accepted as true, will imply an instruction to act with respect to the members of the kind that the normative generic is about. Accepting (27), for example, means accepting the instructions following from treating death caps as though they are edible, immigrants as though they are dangerous, and Russian soldiers as though they are heroes.

4 Two real examples

The meaning of a normative generic is not only “law-like” (Greenberg 2003), it literally entails a socially valid law (or rule in terms of Cohen 2001). Semantically, a normative generic expresses that there is a socially accepted rule according to which what falls under *P* likewise falls under *Q*. Pragmatically, the speaker invites the hearer to adjust their actions to this rule, either by newly informing about it or by reminding of it. If the hearer happens to be a *P* themselves, this specifies to an imperative to act in accordance with the rule.²²

Political leaders and their followers have long understood that they have to establish accepted normative generics in the common ground of the society in order to channel the way members of the society act (e.g. vote). One way to reach that goal in the absence of enough real facts to point to is to tell *stories*, and this is what they are doing all the time. The purpose of telling stories is to bias our perception of the world in such a way that the rule the political agent aims to implement or reinforce gains plausibility. The mechanism pursued is, so we propose, as follows: stories are told because they provide episodic evidence for inducing statistical generics and striking property generics, and statistical and striking property generics then serve as arguments for accepting normative generics.²³

We owe the idea that episode-based generics underpin normative generics (by serving as evidence for the latter) to Haslanger (2014). The following is an adapted example taken from that work.

(29) A: Stop crying, Johnny! Boys don’t cry. (reproach: normative)

B: No, you’re wrong, Dad. Boys do cry! (respond: statistical)

In (29), the father first accuses his son of inappropriate behaviour by providing a normative generic. The normative generic is supposed to serve as an argument that the boy does not behave the way he should behave as a boy. Now the son’s defence is interesting: he proves his father wrong by presenting a counter-argument, which formally is the same generic, but with opposite polarity (affirmative instead of negative). Is this reply only a “countering instruction” (cf. Hesni 2021:12596)? No, it is more. The son’s reply really undermines the father’s argument by pointing to the fact that the reality shows no support for the statistical generic *Boys don’t cry*. If the father looked at the facts, he would have to conclude that a true statistical generic can only be *Boys cry*. By providing this, the son questions the validity of the rule expressed by the father’s normative generic.

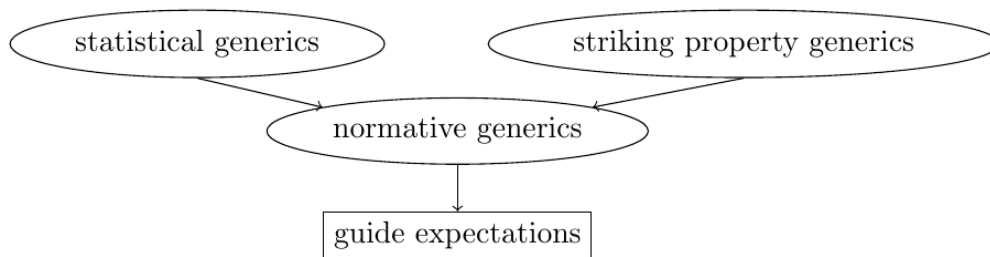


Figure 1: Episode-based generics feed normative generics.

²²If the speaker is a *P*, the hearer is asked to expect *P*-like actions from the speaker’s side. If neither the speaker nor the hearer are *P*, the hearer is advised to act in accordance with the rule upon encountering a member of *P*.

²³Recall that statistical and striking property generics together make up the class of descriptive generics. Unlike normative generics, they do not “suggest that the characteristic connection between property and kind is a somehow close or intimate one” (Nickel 2017:450), i.e., that it is a “principled connection” (Prasada & Dillingham 2006).

In the remainder of this paper, we provide two cases where stories are told in order to provide the relevant episodes needed to convince the audience of the truth of episode-based generics. In one case the respective episode-based generic is a striking-property generic, in the other case it is a statistical generic. Both, once successfully accepted, serve in the further run as arguments for establishing normative generics.

4.1 Example 1: Dogs and cats

4.1.1 The media statement

In the 2024 election campaign, during a presidential debate with Kamala Harris, Donald Trump said in an answer to a question about immigration the following (Sept 10, 2024):

- (30) *“They’re eating the dogs, the people that came in, they’re eating the cats, they’re eating the pets of the people that live there, and this is what’s happening in our country, and it’s a shame.”*

4.1.2 Linguistic classification

In his statement, Trump points to an apparent piece of reality. By using imperfective aspect under the present tense (present progressive), he refers the audience to episodes, to events that are supposed to go on at the time of his speaking. Being plain assertions without any piece of modality involved, the utterance of the respective sentences commits the speaker to the truth of what he is saying. This is, of course, exactly what Trump wants, and it stands in sharp contrast to the fact that there were no credible reports of immigrants eating pets, let alone harder pieces of evidence (cf. Kurylo & Reifowitz 2025:129).

In addition, Trump uses two nominalisations to draw a clear contrast between two social groups: the “people that came in [to the U.S.]” on the one hand, and the “people that live there [in Springfield]” on the other hand. By drawing this contrast, Trump evokes the established social kinds of nationals (“we”) and foreigners (“they”).

4.1.3 The descriptive generic suggested by the episodic

By stirring up sympathy for cherished pets, these episodes are threatening to their owners, in other words, to ordinary Americans. In the face of their alertness, the alleged facts suggest the truth of the following striking property generic, which we pin down in two versions:

- (31) a. *People that come here eat the pets of the people that live here.*
 b. *Immigrants eat Americans’ pets.*

The psychological rationale behind striking property generics like (31) has been described in section 2.3 above. To repeat, it leads from the awareness of one or a few threatening events to the belief in the generalisation expressed in the generic. Leslie (2017) describes it as a protective mechanism. In order to prevent yourself from getting into situations with such bad consequences in the future, you classify a whole social group as potential initiators of this type of action, to be on the safe side.

One parameter that needs to be fixed in this conceptual process is the question of which social group it is that gets associated with the threatening episode. To this end, Leslie proposes that the organisation of our stereotypical knowledge provides us with a range of

well-established social kinds that may serve, so to speak, as cognitive breaking points. Terms referring to these social kinds serve the subject category of the respective generic.

With respect to the Trump example, the relevant social kind is suggested linguistically as the group of immigrants (“the people that came in”), even more so as it is contrasted with “the people that live there”. A moment of reflection would suffice to see that the reason to eat pets, if that actually happened, would be utter despair in the face of hunger, and not the property of being an immigrant or Haitian. But for many listeners, this insight is trumped (if we may say so) by the already existing prejudices against migration.

4.1.4 Integration into the broader narrative

The generic descriptive in (31) is just one example of many stereotypes that Trump has propagated in recent years. Kurylo & Reifowitz (2025:30) provide the following list.

- (32)
- a. *Immigrants bring crime.*
 - b. *Immigrants import poverty.*
 - c. *Immigrants spread disease.*
 - d. *Immigrants don't assimilate.*
 - e. *Immigrants corrupt American politics.*
 - f. *Immigrants steal jobs from Americans.*
 - g. *Immigrants cause taxes to increase.*
 - h. *Immigrants are a security risk.*

The bizarre anecdotal event apparently referred to in (30) serves to support most of these stereotypes. It therefore implies not only the striking property generic (31), but in fact all of those listed in (32).

The force that drives striking property generalisations is emotion. The emotion behind the cases of (32) is fear, fear of a major threat.²⁴ If the predications in (32) are accepted as true and read together, it becomes obvious that the threat associated with immigrants is existential for the US-American people.

For Beaver & Stanley (2023:432), presenting a group of people as an existential threat is the signature of genocidal speech (see below, section 4.2). Another narrative that crucially builds on the emotions of an existential threat is the theory of the great replacement:

Great Replacement Theory (GRT) is another way to cast a group as an existential threat. GRT presupposes an ideology of the nation, according to which it is historically ethnically and religiously homogeneous and pure [...] In GRT, this ideology, including its traditions and practitioners, is supposedly existentially imperiled by a target, usually an influx of foreign races, ethnicities, or religions. (Beaver & Stanley 2023:432)

For those who believe in the accuracy of the stereotyping descriptive generics as they are launched by Trump, including (31), immigrants pose an existential threat to the American nation. It should be easy to see that the communication of such a threat relates to the spreading of the ideology of the great replacement, which backs up the American president's

²⁴Fear against immigrants stands in sharp contrast to the statistics, which tell that immigrants commit crimes at a lower rate than native-born Americans (cf. Kurylo & Reifowitz 2025:32).

political programme: “We are going to stop this invasion. This invasion is destroying the fabric of our country” (Trump, quoted in Kurylo & Reifowitz 2025: 133).

4.1.5 The normative generic argued for

The descriptive generic (31b), once accepted as accurately describing reality, will add to the stereotype that Trump has launched by repeatedly presenting immigrants as dangerous to Americans in similar ways. For many, it may be perceived as the last straw that broke the camel’s back. If so, Trump’s message will trigger the acceptance of the conceptual rule $P \rightarrow Q$, with P being *to be an immigrant*, and Q being *to be dangerous to American citizens*. Many people will incorporate this new stereotypical rule into their personal general knowledge or, if they had done so before, they will affirm it, thus reinforcing the stereotype. The stereotype $P \rightarrow Q$ is linguistically expressible using a normative generic, as in (28b), for example, repeated here in a more intense form.

(33) *An immigrant is extremely dangerous, a threat to our lives.*

The episode reported in (30) is counted as one more argument for the truth of the descriptive generic (31). It is very appealing to let the stereotype (33) sink in on the basis of it, because the stereotype has a benefit. Having the respective rule in conceptual knowledge means increasing awareness about the members of the group as potential dangers. If the threat is real, and this is what the relevant people believe, this increases the chance of escaping the dangerous consequences that the actions of the immigrants cause.

If you are convinced by the truth of (33), this belief will suggest the behavioural directive indicated in (34) as good advice for the sake of survival, driving white people to behave more hostile towards immigrants (Kurylo & Reifowitz 2025:59).

(34) *Beware of immigrants!*

In summary, the message behind (30) is the suggestion or substantiation of a rule of a social kind, i.e., that immigrants have properties that put in danger the everyday life of normal US citizens. The acceptance of the rule (or stereotype) in one’s background knowledge presupposes the acceptance of a category of normal US citizens united under a national “we”. Once accepted, the rule provides justification for a hostile treatment of “them”, the immigrants.

4.2 Example 2: Heroes

4.2.1 The media statement

“Ulica geroev” (Street of Heroes) was a widely used street name in the Soviet Union. Today, this name is used on a page of the online edition of Rossiyskaya Gazeta (RG). Figure 2 shows a screenshot from October 1, 2024 (<https://rg.ru/2022/12/14/ulica-geroev.htm>).²⁵

²⁵The page can still be accessed via the Internet Wayback Machine under https://web.archive.org/web/20221101000000*/https://rg.ru/2022/10/26/ulica-geroev.html

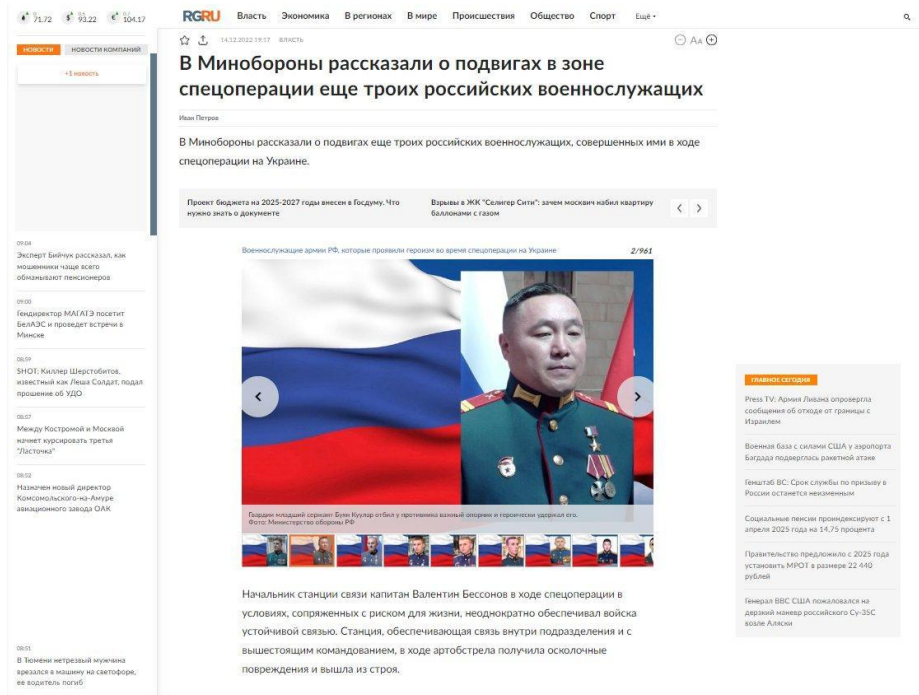


Figure 2: Screenshot Rossiyskaya Gazeta 1

The RG is the official press organ of the Russian Federation. On 17 May 2024, the newspaper was placed on the sanctions list by the EU due to accusations of spreading propaganda. The ulica geroev section is basically a series of portraits of Russian soldiers who are said to have performed outstanding military feats during the war in Ukraine. Structured as an online gallery, the series, which is constantly growing, brings together hundreds of “heroes”. Each item features a portrait photo of a military man in uniform in front of the Russian tricolour. Figure 3 shows an example that represents the number 2 out of 961 heroic deeds at the time of the screenshot (October 2024).

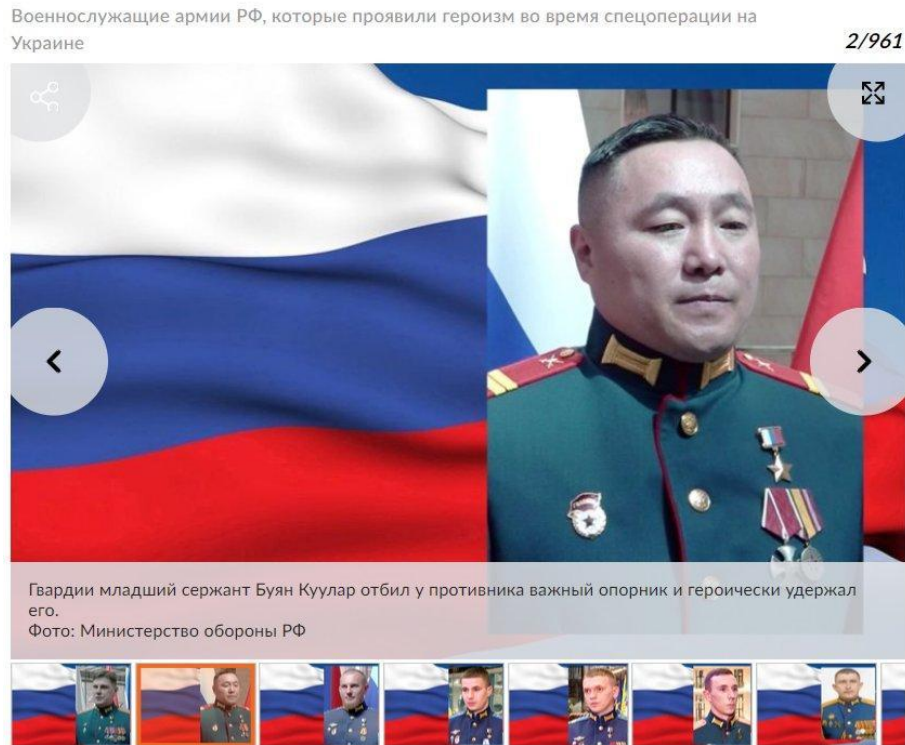


Figure 3: Screenshot Rossiyskaya Gazeta 2

Below each picture there is always a sentence describing the soldier's heroic deed. The sentence below of the portrait in Figure 3 says that "Guards junior sergeant Buyan Kuular captured an important stronghold from the enemy and heroically held it".

Such a sentence typically consists of a subject phrase (consisting of the military rank and the name of the soldier), a transitive verbal predicate (in the perfective aspect and in the past tense) and a direct object. The sentences deal with military achievements, either successful offensive actions to the detriment of the enemy (the Ukrainian army) or successful defensive actions to the benefit of the hero's own side (the Russian army).

4.2.2 Linguistic classification

Since the use of a verb in the perfective aspect communicates a change of state, and given the narrative tense past, the sentences can be understood as "minimal stories". Prince's (1987) dictionary of narratology defines a minimal story as follows.

Minimal story: A narrative recounting only two states and one event such that: (1) one state precedes the event in time, and the event precedes the other state in time (and causes it); (2) the second state constitutes the inverse (or the modification, including the "zero" modification) of the first. "John was happy, then he saw Peter, then, as a result, he was unhappy". (Prince 1987:53)

In the case of the deed reported in Figure 3, the first state is when the stronghold was under the control of the Ukrainian army, whereas the second state is when it is under the control of the Russian forces. (35) shows the full example with linguistic glosses.

- (35) *Gvardnik mladšij seržant Bulan Kuular otbil u*
 guard younger sergeant B. K. capture.PST.PFV at
protivnika važnyj opornik i geroičeski uderžal ego.

combatant important stronghold and heroically hold.PST.PFV it
 ‘Guards junior sergeant Buyan Kuular captured an important stronghold from the enemy and heroically held it.’

At the time we took the screenshot, on October 1, 2024, a total of 961 such stories had been told. We have created a corpus of the first 400 of these minimal heroic narratives. As explained above, the database is compiled of 400 perfective sentences reporting heroic stories supposed to be facts. Table 1 gives an impression of the structure of the database, which can be accessed via Figshare (Mueller-Reichau & Irmer. 2026)²⁶.

Table 1: Structure of the database

Subject	Predicate	Direct object	Other sentence parts
Мотострелковая рота под командованием лейтенанта Джанбулата Тебердиева	отразила	4 атаки ВСУ	
Сержант Александр Артемьев	уничтожил	танк, два бронетранспортера и более 10 боевиков	из ПТУР
Младший сержант Семен Никитин с товарищами	удержал	стратегически важную, господствующую высоту	
Капитан Валентин Бессонов	неоднократно с риском для жизни обеспечивал	войска устойчивой связью	
Ефрейтор Артем Перевозкин	подбил	две вражеские бронемашины	точными выстрелами

The database thus partitions the sentences according to syntactic functions into ‘Subject’, ‘Predicate’, ‘Direct object’, and ‘Other sentence parts’. The far most frequent predicate that occurs in the corpus is *unictozit* ‘destroy’, as can be seen in Table 2. The distribution of the subject items is given in Table 3.

Table 2: Most frequent predicate items in the corpus, lemmatised

Freq	Lemma	Translation
126	уничтожить	destroy
24	обнаружить	discover
15	вывести	withdraw
15	восстановить	recover
12	подбить	pound
10	эвакуировать	evacuate
10	пресек	suppress
8	спас	rescue
8	подавить	suppress

²⁶<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28850882>

Freq	Lemma	Translation
8	обеспечить	provide

Table 3: Most frequent subject items in the corpus, lemmatised

Freq	Lemma	Translation
134	сержант	sergeant
73	старший	senior
52	лейтенант	lieutenant
40	рядовой	private
38	ефрейтор	ensign
37	александр	Alexander
36	младший	junior
29	капитан	captain
27	сергей	Sergei
26	прапорщик	warrant officer
21	дмитрий	Dmitry
20	vladimir	Vladimir
19	алексей	Alexey
18	майор	major
14	иван	Ivan
13	vladislav	Vladislav
13	евгений	Eugene
12	старшего	senior
12	андрей	Andrei

In (36) we present a typical example with a full written gloss.

- (36) *Seržant Aleksandr Artem'ev uničtožil tank, dva bronetransportera*
 sergeant A. A. destroy.PST.PFV tank two APC
i bolee 10 boevikov iz PTUR.
 and more ten fighters from PTUR
 ‘Sgt. Alexander Artemyev destroyed a tank, two armoured personnel carriers, and more than 10 militants with anti-tank guided missiles.’

4.2.3 The descriptive generic suggested by the episodic

The aim of the website Ulica geroev can be viewed as accumulating episodes of heroic deeds, each one contributing to the prognosed victory of the Russian forces against the Ukrainian forces. Overall, these “facts” invite the inference that the following statistical generic holds true.

(37) *In the war against Ukraine, Russian soldiers beat Ukrainian troops.*

This generic sentence expresses a statistical generalisation, i.e. a generalisation that is claimed to be a valid description of the facts (see Section 2.2).

4.2.4 Integration into the broader narrative

Once established on the ground of sufficiently many reported episodes, the generic (37) integrates into a traditional narrative which Nicolosi (2025:100) describes as a script consisting of three events: attack from the outside, heroic defence, triumphant victory. In the words of Troebst (2014:10), “[t]he victorious resistance against foreign military interventions is the common denominator of tsarist, Soviet and Russian historical policy”. According to the historical culture of remembrance, which the Russian state cultivates through extensive cultural policy measures, this script has been repeatedly realised. Once in 1812 in the “Patriotic War” against Napoleon, and once 1941-45 in the “Great Patriotic War” against Germany.

Today’s war against the Ukraine (more precisely, against the Nato countries), is presented as a reenactment of the previous wars instantiating the frame “Defence of the homeland” (Nicolosi 2025:101). In reference to the two “Patriotic Wars”, the expansion of NATO’s sphere of influence to Ukraine is portrayed as an existential threat to the Russian nation, with Ukraine itself reducing to an anti-Russian construct of the “collective West”. This existential threat to Russia is used to justify talk of genocide against Russians in (parts of) the Ukraine (Beaver & Stanley 2023:432; Nicolosi 2025:51-52).

4.2.5 The normative generic argued for

If the statistical generic (37) is read as an instance of the ‘Defence of the homeland’-script, it will give rise to the consolidation of the normative generic (38).

(38) *A Russian defends his homeland heroically.*

As pointed out above in Section 3.2, normative generics express rules that, when uttered, come with instructions to act. The rule $P \rightarrow Q$ expressed by this normative generic has *to be Russian* as P and *to defend Russia heroically* as Q . If addressed to the outside, it will invite the directive stated in (39).

(39) *Don’t mess with Russia!*

If addressed to the Russian population, which feels more likely given that the RG is a Russian newspaper, the directive will become:

(40) *Defend your homeland! Support your soldiers!*

5 Conclusions

In this paper, we show how linguistic expressions accompany and significantly shape the establishment of stereotypes in the context of social and/or political discourse. We began by working out three different types of generic sentences discussed in the relevant literature:

(1) Statistical (Inductive) Generics: These report generalisations inferrable from empirical observations or how individuals behave, thus entailing the existence of real-world episodes. Describing prevalent properties of the members of a kind, their validity depends on

sufficiently many occurrences supporting the generalisation, making them falsifiable by counting instances.

(2) Striking Property Generics: These are episode-based like statistical generics are, but they will be accepted even when only a tiny minority of instances possess the property, which is why the predicated property should be harmful, dangerous, or for other reasons extraordinarily important. The acceptance of striking property generics is driven by strong emotions (e.g., fear or admiration) and involves a rapid generalisation of episodic information to the salient kind.

(3) Normative (Definitional) Generics: These express what ought to be the case by stating definitional rules for a kind. Although normative generics define the world, their felicity does not directly depend on the existence of real-world instances. Possibly addressing fictional or hypothetical kinds, normative generics do not entail but only imply claims about the existence of members of the kind. Their acceptance is based solely on the validity of a rule. Normative generics about social kinds express stereotypes. Their utterance conveys an instruction to act in accordance with the rule (which includes linguistic action, i.e. the proper use of kind terms).

The paper's core argument is a hierarchy among the different types of generics: the acceptance of episode-based generics (statistical and striking property generics) underpins and feeds the acceptance of normative generics. This hierarchy is critical for understanding practices of strategic communication and political influence, because political agents aim to form normative generic knowledge within a society's common ground to guide thinking, speaking, and acting. We proposed that the mechanism applied to achieve this goal is basically a two-step process:

1. Telling stories to provide the episodic evidence necessary to licence descriptive (statistical and striking property) generics.
2. Using these accepted descriptive generics as arguments for the acceptance of normative generics.

Once accepted within a community of practice, a normative generic documents a socially valid law or rule that guides expectations and behaviour of said community. We provided two case studies for illustration. First, Donald Trump's Springfield story about immigrants eating pets aimed to establish a striking property generic ("Immigrants eat Americans' pets"), which in turn supports the normative generic "An immigrant is a threat". Once established in background knowledge, this normative generic then invites the directive "Beware of immigrants!". Secondly, we portrayed the project "Ulica geroev" that aims to compile numerous minimal stories of heroic deeds by Russian soldiers, inducing the statistical generic that "In the war against Ukraine, Russian soldiers beat Ukrainian troops". We argued that the acceptance of this generic reinforces the normative generic "A Russian defends his homeland heroically", thereby encouraging, among other things, support for the Russian soldiers.

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