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Generic Language as a Vehicle for Socially-Contingent Generalizations

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Abstract

Generalizations in thought and language are powerful tools to share information agents need to predict and control their environments. However, some generalizations are restricted to “sociocultural bubbles” (e.g. “women have trouble getting tenure in math”). How do we communicate such patterns? We examined how 4-7-year-olds ($N=110$) and adults ($N=159$) respond to context cues signaling that the speaker uses a generic generalization to convey a broad vs. contextually-restricted regularity. Adults endorsed generics flexibly, tracking context cues ($p<.001$), but younger children struggled, over-attributing socially contingent properties to the group beyond the “bubble”, on par with context-general regularities. This reveals a troubling discrepancy between children and adults’ interpretations of generics, opening doors for miscommunication. When adults highlight problematic patterns with the hope of promoting social change, children may perceive their assertions as claims about group’s broad, unalterable attributes. We discuss strategies to mitigate this in educational and family communication settings.