The unmarked ... carries the meaning that goes without saying—what you think of when you’re not thinking anything special.

—Deborah Tannen, “Marked Women, Unmarked Men”

When telling people that he was studying suburban gays, writes Wayne Brekhus, “I was often asked if I am gay. No one ever asked, however, if I was suburban,”1 thereby tacitly revealing the far greater cultural salience conventionally attached to certain aspects of one’s identity than others.

Yet why, indeed, is being gay conventionally considered more culturally salient for determining “what” one is than being suburban? Furthermore, why is the term openly gay used far more widely than its nominally equivalent lexical counterpart openly straight?

Answering such questions calls for a thorough examination of the concepts of markedness and unmarkedness.

As their etymology implies, the distinction between the “marked” and the “unmarked” is essentially the distinction between the remarkable and the unremarkable. In sharp contrast to the former, which figuratively “stands out,” the latter is viewed as lacking any distinctive features and, as such, is considered “nondescript.” The distinction thus captures the supposedly fundamental difference between “holy” places (a shrine), “formal” attire (a tuxedo), or “festive” food (a birthday
cake) and their effectively “mundane” cultural counterparts. As further exemplified by the difference between the occurrences we deem “uneventful” and those we consider “news,” it is basically a distinction between the ordinary, or “plain,” and the special.

In sharp contrast to the marked, which is explicitly accentuated, the unmarked remains unarticulated. As such, it is exemplified by the default options on a computer menu. Reflecting what we assume by default, it is thus effectively taken for granted.

The distinction between the marked and the unmarked dates back to a 1930 letter from Nikolai Trubetzkoj to fellow linguist Roman Jakobson pointing to the fundamental contrast between pairs of phonemes, one of which possesses a certain feature that the other does not. Naming the one possessing that feature the marked member of the pair and the one implicitly defined by its absence the unmarked one, Jakobson immediately took Trubetzkoj’s observation one step further, noting that “every single constituent of any linguistic system” is in fact “built on . . . the presence of an attribute (‘markedness’) in contraposition to its absence (‘unmarkedness’).”

Furthermore, Jakobson also realized that the fundamental distinction between markedness and unmarkedness actually transcends linguistics, indeed noting its overall cultural significance, but it took another half-century before it was explicitly incorporated into a somewhat broader semiotic framework—a critical intellectual leap made by his student and collaborator Linda Waugh. Concluding her 1982 article “Marked and Unmarked: A Choice between Unequals in Semiotic Structure” with a special section explicitly titled “Examples from Other Semiotic Systems” featuring culturally salient contrastive semiotic pairs such as blackness/whiteness and homosexuality/
heterosexuality, Waugh thus proposed a full-fledged semiotic theory of markedness and unmarkedness.

The act of *marking* sets the special apart from the ordinary either physically (putting a “One Way” traffic sign to mentally separate a given street from “ordinary,” two-way ones), ritually (making a toast on “special” occasions), or institutionally (formally rewarding “exemplary” behavior or an “outstanding” accomplishment). Yet it is most spectacularly exemplified lexically.

After all, the all-too-common dismissive expression “It’s just semantics” notwithstanding, *language* certainly reflects the way we think about things, as the actual words we use often reveal our *cognitive defaults*. The term *menstrual cycle*, for example, clearly reveals the considerably greater significance culturally attached to the menstrual phase of women’s hormonal cycle than to its reproductively far-more-critical yet nevertheless semiotically unmarked ovulatory counterpart. By the same token, consider the term *white trash*, which to this day “still flies with little self-conscious hesitancy on the part of the user [and] continues to be sustained socially by an almost unconscious naturalness.” Although originally designed to mark poor whites who do not conform to their expected and thus unmarked middle-class racial image and are therefore considered “not quite white,” in fact it actually marks not only “white trash” but also “white trash”! After all, as an adjective, it is indeed the word *white* that is ultimately designed to modify the default meaning of the noun *trash* rather than the other way around, and the term *white trash* thus actually marks not only white people who are considered “trashy” but also “trashy” people who happen to be white. If they were black, or so goes this essentially racist default assumption, the term *black trash*, for example, would have been considered redundant.
That certainly exemplifies the important role of labeling, the most effective form of marking, in establishing and maintaining the fundamental cultural contrast between what we explicitly mark and what we implicitly assume by default and take for granted. Given the existence of the Black Entertainment Television cable network and the Women’s National Basketball Association, for example, the very absence of a “White Entertainment Television” network and an explicitly gendered “Men’s National Basketball Association” thus underscores the fact that whereas blackness and femaleness are conventionally marked in America, whiteness and maleness are not. By the same token, given the presence of “Arab Affairs” newspaper, radio, and television correspondents in Israel, the glaring absence of “Jewish Affairs” journalists likewise implies that, in sharp contrast to Arabness, Jewishness is conventionally considered ordinary there. In a similar vein, in sharp contrast to its lexical counterpart male nurse, the term female nurse is conventionally considered redundant, “for saying nurse already implies that.”

The extent to which something is conventionally considered ordinary, in other words, is inversely related to the availability of cultural labels to denote it. The taken-for-grantedness of the unmarked is thereby evidenced in its semiotic superfluity, as manifested in the paucity of cultural labels denoting what is conventionally assumed by default. Being regarded as literally un-remarkable, it is not considered worth mentioning.

It would therefore be useful to compare the actual vocabularies culturally available for denoting marked versus unmarked phenomena in a given speech community. As we shall see, the relation between such vocabularies is indeed pronouncedly asymmetrical, with terms denoting marked phenomena being much more widely available than ones denoting their unmarked counterparts.
Thus, for example, given the historical closetedness of homosexuality in America, one would expect the term *openly gay* to be far more widely used there than its nominally equivalent counterpart *openly straight*. By the same token, the term *working mom* reflects the traditionally marked status of middle-class working mothers, which sharply contrasts with the effectively unmarked status of working fathers. Conventionally assumed by default and thus taken for granted, the latter thereby require no special marking, and a term such as *working dad*, for instance, would actually seem redundant.

Along similar lines, we thus also “have the *career woman* . . . but not the career man. Men by definition have careers, but women who do so must be marked. . . . A man can also be a *family man*, but it would be odd to call a woman a *family woman*. Women are by definition family women.” Indeed, by lexically marking traditionally “special” people (male nurses, the openly gay, middle-class working moms), we tacitly also characterize their “ordinary,” unmarked counterparts by the very absence of presumed and thereby seemingly superfluous adjectival qualifiers such as *female* (for nurses), *openly* (for straights), and *working* (for dads) to denote them.

Such pronounced cultural asymmetries can in fact be demonstrated empirically by measuring actual lexical usage through frequency counts of the words and phrases people use, with glaring statistical gaps between nominally equivalent lexical pairs exemplifying the fundamental *semiotic asymmetry* between the marked and the unmarked. Whereas a simple Google search for the term *openly gay*, for example, yields 3,740,000 hits, a parallel search for its nominally equivalent counterpart *openly straight* yields only 32,800. While the former denotes what is conventionally deemed “special” and therefore literally remark-able, the latter denotes an “ordinary,” culturally
unremark-able phenomenon conventionally assumed by default and thereby taken for granted.

In a similar vein, whereas a search for the term *working mom*, for example, yields 8,520,000 hits, a parallel search for its nominally equivalent lexical counterpart *working dad* yields only 117,000.\(^\text{16}\) And while a search for the term *first-generation students* yields 282,000 entries, a parallel search for its nominally equivalent counterpart *third-generation students* yields only 6,880.\(^\text{17}\) Similar searches yield significantly more results for *abnormal psychology* (3,290,000) and *seafood* (174,000,000) than for their respective nominally equivalent lexical counterparts *normal psychology* (37,600) and *landfood* (25,900).\(^\text{18}\)

Effectively exemplifying the pronouncedly asymmetrical amounts of cultural attention respectively paid to the marked and the unmarked, frequency counts of the actual words and phrases people use thus represent collective attention patterns.\(^\text{19}\) And indeed, whereas the marked is by its very definition highly noticeable and thereby culturally “visible,” the unmarked represents the “background” regions of our phenomenal world,\(^\text{20}\) which typically escape our attention.\(^\text{21}\) It is in fact its cultural invisibility, therefore, that so distinctly characterizes the unmarked.

Whether one considers something marked or unmarked is by no means just a matter of personal opinion. Yet nor is anything inherently marked or unmarked. Specialness and ordinariness are in fact but social constructions, products of particular semiotic norms, traditions, and conventions that we share as members of specific “thought communities.”\(^\text{22}\) And as we shall see, what we assume by default and therefore take for granted indeed varies across cultures as well as among different subcultures and across different social situations within a given society.
As we mark things, thus effectively implying that they cannot be assumed by default and therefore taken for granted, we actually “abnormalize” them, thereby tacitly also normalizing what remains unmarked. Marking (and thereby abnormalizing) femaleness, blackness, homosexuality, or disability, for example, is thus effectively inseparable from the conventional semiotic tradition of presuming the normality of maleness, whiteness, straightness, and able-bodiedness.

As we shall see, normality plays a major role in establishing as well as maintaining social dominance, which in fact involves the power to affect what others come to take for granted by tacitly leading them to make certain default assumptions without their even realizing that they are making them! Such dominance is manifested in the power to actually set the very standards of normality as well as to abnormalize, through a politico-semiotic process of “othering,” whatever deviates from them. Indeed, it is the fact that they are conventionally considered “self-evident” and thereby assumed by default and taken for granted that allows certain ideas, practices, and identities to maintain their cultural dominance.

In fact, the more dominant a social group, the more likely is its identity to remain unmarked. It is thus socially dominant identities such as maleness, whiteness, straightness, and able-bodiedness that are conventionally assumed by default and taken for granted, and their bearers who therefore often become culturally invisible.

A full-fledged sociology of markedness and unmarkedness thus reveals the way in which structures of power are socially produced, maintained, as well as reproduced. But as we shall see, in so doing it also helps reveal the ways in which those very structures are sometimes challenged and subverted.
The present book is an attempt to draw explicit attention to what we implicitly assume by default and therefore take for granted. Yet how, indeed, are we to actually “take account of . . . the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary . . . the background noise, the habitual?”

Anybody who ventures to study the taken-for-granted inevitably faces a formidable epistemic challenge. After all, as we are reminded by Friedrich Nietzsche, “what we are used to is most difficult . . . to see” as an actual object of inquiry. The unmarked regions of our phenomenal world are therefore “elusive and slippery things, providing . . . no outside perspective or scaffolding” on which to figuratively stand. Indeed, it actually took social anthropologists Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward six months of studying the cultural practice of wearing blue jeans to realize that those pants’ most significant property is in fact their ordinariness:

While it was always obvious that denim could be described as ordinary, the suggestion that this might be the key to our findings didn’t occur to us . . . until around six months into our fieldwork. . . . Initially the word ordinary seemed so banal, more a taken-for-granted background than a pretender to the crown of accomplished research. For the same reason, arriving at a sense of the profundity and importance of ordinariness took even longer.

As a result, the unmarked has rarely been studied per se, thereby still remaining an intellectual blind spot. Despite the many studies involving heterosexual sex, for example, heterosexuality itself has until relatively recently been assumed by default and thus taken for granted, thereby effectively escaping analysis. The same, indeed, has been true of maleness, whiteness, and able-bodiedness.
Furthermore, given the fact that the unmarked distinctly lacks certain properties characteristically possessed by the marked, studying it thus also involves the epistemic challenge of having to observe absence, thereby making it methodologically elusive. Acts of omission, after all, are much harder to notice than acts of commission (which is why neglected children are often unaware of what they are not getting), and whereas the disabled often provide vivid accounts of the challenges they face, the experience of being able-bodied is not so readily articulable.

Exploring the very phenomenon of unmarkedness thus requires the ability to actually notice what is “conspicuous by its absence” and thereby “see” and “hear” the conventionally invisible and inaudible. And given the fact that the unmarked is effectively inarticulable, exploring it requires being particularly attentive to what linguists call lexical gaps. As we encounter the terms male nurse, working mom, and openly gay, for example, we thus need to be able to also “hear” the absence of their nominally equivalent counterparts—female nurse, working dad, and openly straight.

Studying the unmarked, in short, requires exceptional self-reflectiveness about what we habitually and thus pre-reflectively take for granted! Given such a formidable methodological challenge, the paucity of actual studies of taken-for-grantedness therefore comes as no surprise. Such studies, however, nonetheless promise us “a startling new view of a previously invisible, taken-for-granted, ‘normal’ . . . universe.” And in so doing they may therefore “unsettle forever” our very idea of normality.