Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better: 
Category Evolution and the Ro-Ro Ferry

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The stability of categories and classification systems that form and inform social life depend on a social process in which category members adhere to basic membership standards of the category. Category members can differentiate themselves on some dimensions, but those who deviate from category standards will be penalized by audiences for not conforming. How, then, do categories evolve? We address this question through an inductive, historical case study examining the evolution of roll-on, roll-off (“ro-ro”) car ferries on the Baltic Sea. We apply an emergent lens to look at the ongoing social construction and enactment of the ro-ro ferry across the more than fifty year history from the inception of the category to the present. Our data set combines detailed evidence on the features of every ferry in the category with comprehensive data on the meaning constructed around these ferries in company documents, passenger accounts, and newspaper articles. We find that competitive rivalry between firms in the ro-ro ferry market manifests in tit-for-tat copying which shifts the on-board arrangements, the ship structures, and the passenger experiences. These shifts lead to changes in the discourse of both the shipping companies and the audiences. As the meaning of the ferry evolves across the life of the ferry, it progresses from a “road across the sea” to a “cruise ferry” to a “floating luxury hotel” to a “booze cruise.” We show how competition within a category, which the category literature usually addresses as a form of differentiation, can also occur through copying, such that the sequence of changes could result in much larger shifts in the overall meaning of the category.