

Generic markers: a basic questionnaire and experimental toolkit
(oral or poster)

Introduction. The past decades have witnessed a surge of interdisciplinary interest in genericity disciplines: psychology, philosophy, and formal linguistics. However, languages that are the target of in-depth studies lack dedicated generic markers. My presentation sketches the state of the art in the study of generic markers in the languages of the world. I propose a basic questionnaire and an experimental toolkit for identifying and describing generic markers.

The phenomenon. Genericity covers two phenomena: a) reference to kinds, and b) propositions expressing general properties of kinds. Instances of generic sentences are given in (1a-3a), contrasted with episodic sentences (1b) and sentences that reveal some puzzling quantificational properties of generic sentences (2b, 3b).

- (1) a. *Tigers have stripes* (versus b. *This tiger is albino.*)
- (2) a. *Ducks lay eggs* (versus b. ??*Ducks are female.*)
- (3) a. *Ticks carry Lyme disease* (versus b. ??*Ticks do not carry Lyme disease.*)

Generic sentences express general properties (1a-3a) as opposed to episodic facts (1b), and they typically convey the commonsense knowledge about the (“our”) world.

The interpretation of generic sentences has puzzled logicians and philosophers for decades. Philosophers of language have long realized that generic sentences cannot be analysed by standard logic approaches. Assigning truth values to generic sentences, as in (1a)-(3a) above, is problematic. For instance, there are less ducks that lay eggs (2a) than there are female ducks (2b). The sentence ‘Ticks do not carry Lyme disease’ in (3b) is false, while ‘Ticks carry Lyme disease’, as in (3a), is true, although only a small percentage of all ticks carry Lyme disease. Despite the problems of establishing the formal semantics of a possible “generic operator”, paradoxically, humans understand the generics without efforts and young children understand and produce generics earlier than they do explicitly expressed quantifiers.

Generic markers are hard to identify, because generic interpretations tend to be the default interpretations of grammatically unmarked sentences or, at least, generic sentences tend to show default or less complex marking as opposed to non-generic marking. In addition, it is hard to find dedicated generic markers that distinguish the sentences in (1-3a) from episodic sentences, because the generic versus specific distinction may cross-cut several grammatical categories. Even if the intuitive distinction between generic and non-generic is clear, generic forms covary with other grammatical categories. Genericity markers are found among definiteness, number, or quantifiers, impersonals, non-finites and nominalizations, aspect, tense, mood, evidentiality, and modal markers. They may mark nouns, verbs, or adjectives.

Why are there so few generic markers, is genericity a grammatical category at all?

The lack of special generic markers seems to be strongly social cognitively motivated. Developmental psychologists have proposed that the capacity to generalize communicated information is innately given. Children are biased to receive general knowledge in non-linguistic communicative situations, expecting to be taught the knowledge that transcends individual experiences in a cultural community.

Methods for typology. Linguists have been hesitant to address “the generic category”, since there is too little evidence for one-to-one mapping between the generic form and meaning across languages. Generic markers are also frequently optional. Drawing upon the insights of recent interdisciplinary, concept-based and pragmatic approaches to generics, I present some methods – a questionnaire and a set of simple experiments – of capturing the form, meaning, and use of generics in particular languages.