

Generic predication and interest-relativity

A widespread view of generics is that they involve an unexpressed quantifier, GEN.

(1) Birds fly.

(1) is commonly analyzed as having a logical form like that in (2), where *bird* contributes a predicate that restricts the domain of quantification of GEN.

(2) GEN (bird x) (fly x)
Q restrictor matrix

As is well known, GEN is a peculiar quantifier. There can be non-flying birds. Exceptions are, however, only the tip of the iceberg. GEN is by no means equivalent to such overt adverbial quantifiers as *mostly* or *generally* or *usually*, which make explicit the possibility of some counter-instances. Examples like those in (3) can be true even if a minority or certainly no clear majority of the individual instances covered by the bare plural subjects are such that the verbal predicate expression as ordinarily understood applies to them.

(3) a. Turtles are long-lived.
b. Deer ticks carry lyme disease.
c. Indigo buntings have vivid blue feathers.
d. Indigo buntings lay pale blue eggs.

Pointing out that young children use and understand generics before overt quantifiers like *all*, Leslie (2007, 2008) argues for a ‘default’ mode of generalization that sometimes amounts to something like ‘almost all’ but may often be understood quite differently.

Carlson (1977, 1980) suggested that the bare plural subject in examples like (1) and (3) denotes a KIND and that generics like those in (1) and (3) predicate a property of a kind. This analysis essentially assimilates generics to kind-level predications like those in (4).

(4) a. Dodos are extinct.
b. Sparrows are widespread.

Recently Liebesman (2009) has resurrected and rejuvenated Carlson’s notion that generics like those in (1) and (3) predicate a property of a kind. Unlike the cases in (4), however, (essentially) the same property predicated in (1) and (3) of a kind can also be predicated of individual instances of the kind. Furthermore, whether the property can be truly predicated of the kind depends somehow on whether it can be truly predicated of (some) individual instances of the kind. Generic predication of a kind is parasitic on ‘canonical’ predication of an individual. If we abandon the quantificational approach to this dependence we need some alternative account.

What I propose is that predicate truth-functions taking kinds as well as kind-instances as arguments are sensitive to language users’ interests in classifying the kind and its

instances. If I am considering a turtle as a pet I would nurture and protect, I need to recognize its potential long life span. But if I am concerned about effects of urban development on animals the actual short life span of most turtles might lead to judging (3a) false. Similarly, in the interest of avoiding lyme disease it would behoove me to avoid contact with deer ticks completely: any is a potential carrier. To understand the avian world, different properties are relevant for female and for male birds. And so on.

There is, Liebesman reminds us, an interesting parallel to individual exceptions for generics or kind-predications. A predicate can be held to apply to an ordinary individual even though it does not hold of some part of the individual for which the question of its applicability might sensibly arise. I could truly utter both sentences in (5).

- (5) a. My favorite casserole is deep purple.
- b. The interior of my favorite casserole is white.

Here too, I argue, it is our interest in the color classification that allows us to ignore certain parts in applying the predicate function to the “whole” individual.

Generic predication is a misnomer. Generic sentences like those illustrated do not exemplify some exotic, “non-canonical,” species of predication: subject-predicate relations as in (1) and (3) are the archetype of predication. But looking at kinds as predicate arguments does bring into sharp relief the often ignored dependence of predicative functions on language users’ classificatory interests.