Is There a Generic Quantifier?

This paper draws attention to disanalogies between the behavior of quantified sentences and the behavior of generic sentences, arguing that these considerations speak against a quantificational analysis of generic sentences (e.g. Krifka, 1987; Fara, 2000)—and possibly in favor of a kind analysis (e.g. Carlson, 1977; 1982). For the purposes of this paper, *generic sentence* should be taken to mean 'sentence with a bare plural noun phrase in subject position followed by a predicate with non-habitual aspect, which has a characterizing meaning': in other words, a sentence of the form *Fs are G*.

According to the quantificational analysis, generic statements are generalizations with a tripartite quantifier/restriction/scope structure; claims about lots of individual things. According to the kind analysis, on the other hand, generic sentences do not express generalizations. Although they may *entail* certain claims about lots of individual things, they do not express any claims about lots of individual things. Rather, they are best analyzed as predications, in which 'Fs' refers to a kind, and a modified version of the G-hood one might predicate of individual objects is predicated of that kind. Instead of taking generic sentences to have this form, where Q is some sort of quantifier:

(1) $Qx(x \text{ is F})(x \text{ is G})$

The kind analysis takes them to have this form, where *P-M* is a predicate modifying operation that maps kind predicates to object predicates:

(2) *P-M*(G)(F-kind)

Which of these theories is to be preferred? Is there a generic quantifier? That depends on what we're asking. On the one hand, we might be asking about what logical paraphrases of generic sentences have to look like. In other words, we might be asking, 'Is it possible to devise a mathematical function mapping pairs of concepts to truth values that could be used to provide a logical paraphrase of generic sentences?' On the other hand, we might be asking about how the meaning of a generic sentence is derived compositionally. In other words, we might be asking, 'Do generic sentences contain an unpronounced quantifier in their syntactic tree at logical form?'

This paper contends that although the answer to the first question is likely yes, the answer to the second question seems to be no. Why? Because if generic sentences did contain an unpronounced quantifier in their syntactic tree at logical form, we would expect them to interact with conversational context in the same way as sentences with overt quantifiers. As it turns out, they do not. Generic sentences and quantified sentences can both undergo contextual domain restriction, but they do so under different circumstances.

Though subtle, the differences can be boiled down to the following three observations. First, contexts which suffice to trigger quantifier domain restriction solely on the basis of the focus and interests of the conversational participants do not suffice to trigger domain restriction in generic sentences. As an example, imagine that I am a reporter for an animal rights publication who has just been sent to Wayne Newton's ranch in order to verify that his newly acquired jaguars are living a happy life. After some investigation, I find that they have been given tattoos. My editor gives me a call, and asks whether I've made any big discoveries. Compare two possible responses that I might give:

(3) a. You're not going to believe this. Every jaguar has a tattoo.
b. You're not going to believe this. Jaguars have tattoos.

The salient reading of (3a) is one on which I'm only talking about jaguars on the ranch. But no reading of (3b) on which I am only talking about the jaguars on the ranch is available.

Second, contexts which suffice to trigger domain restriction on the basis of something mentioned earlier in the discourse allow for domain restriction in both quantified and generic sentences. Observe that in most contexts, these sentences would be false:

(4) a. Squirrels are friendly to people.
b. Every squirrel is friendly to people.

But when preceded by the right kind of discourse, they can come out true:

(5) a. Washington Square Park is quite a place. Squirrels are friendly to people.
b. Washington Square Park is quite a place. Every squirrel is friendly to people.

Both sentences allow for a reading on which the speaker is only concerned with Washington Park squirrels. So it seems as though when the domain restriction is anchored in some previous mention of a time or place, it is allowed in both generic sentences and quantified sentences.

Finally, although generic sentences can sometimes undergo domain restriction in the sort of case just mentioned, sometimes they are debarred from doing so. More specifically, generic sentences allow for a domain restricted interpretation in such contexts only when the result of the restriction can be said to count as a kind. For our purposes, we may assume that a kind is something whose members belong to it by something other than mere coincidence. Now contrast these two sentences, in a scenario in which every item of furntiure in my apartment happens to be oaken:

(6) a. My apartment is quite a place. Every piece of furniture is made of oak.
b. My apartment is quite a place. Pieces of furniture are made of oak.

Whereas (6a) sounds true in this situation, (6b) sounds anomalous, suggesting that the domain restricted reading is available in the former case, though not the latter. (To have the relevant intuitions, it helps to imagine that I have no sense of interior decoration; that I acquire furniture essentially at random.)

In short, the three data points just considered give us reason to question the quantificational analysis as a compositional semantic theory of generic sentences. For if generic sentences contained an unpronounced quantifier at logical form, one would expect them to behave similarly to quantified sentences under permutations of conversational context. Furthermore, the sort of domain restriction that generic sentences can engage in appears to be sensitive to whether it results in a kind. Thus, the kind theory may well enjoy a certain advantage over the quantificational theory—though in order for it truly to have the advantage, some explanation of why domain restriction is sometimes permitted in generic sentences would clearly have to be forthcoming. Although I do not explore these details here, I think they represent strong prospects for future research.

Selected References: Carlson, 1977. *Reference to Kinds in English.* • Carlson, 1982. 'Generic Terms and Generic Sentences.' In *Journal of Philosophical Logic.* • Fara, 2001. *Dispositions and Their Ascriptions.* • Krifka, 1987. 'An Outline of Genericity.' In *Forschungsberichte des Seminars für natürlich-sprachliche Systeme.*