

Nominal Generics: Past and Present

Introduction

It is a quite common assumption in the event semantics literature that deverbal *-er* nominals, as in (1), are semantically similar (Chierchia 1995; Cohen 2009) or even identical (Larson 1998; Egg 2008) to habituals.

- (1) a. John teaches / smokes / snores.
b. John is a teacher / smoker / snorer.

There is general consensus that such *-er* nominals and habituals equally express generic statements over events; however, there is less consensus concerning the exact interpretations and semantic structures in each case. This general question can be divided into several sub-problems presented below.

1. Are nominal generics semantically identical to verbal generics?

This issue remains rather controversial. Larson (1998) and Egg (2008) assume the semantic equivalence of nominal and verbal generics, without going into much detail though. By contrast, Chierchia (1995) analyzes them differently: although both of them are supposed to involve the same **Gen** (including the same modal base and ordering source), the predicates in the scope are different (**smoke** vs. **smoker**) and the type of the restriction is different as well (contextually relevant situations vs. simply all situations which involve John):

- (2) a. **Gen** s [$C(j, s)$] [**smoke**(j, s)] John smokes
b. **Gen** s [**in**(j, s)] [**smoker**(j, s)] John is a smoker

Cohen (2010) points out that Chierchia’s formalization misses “the obvious connection” between *smoke* and *smoker*. Unifying the representation to **smoke** in the nuclear scope in both cases, he places the difference elsewhere: habituals are supposed to be evaluated w.r.t. a *uniform* ordering source (inductive inference from observed behaviour of repeated instances), while *-er* nominals w.r.t. a *stereotypical* ordering source (sensitivity to inherent properties). However, it is not clear how robust Cohen’s intuitions concerning the difference in ordering sources are and whether his examples are generalizable to other nominal-habitual pairs, such as *teacher/teach*, *snorer/snore*, etc.

2. Are nominal generics ambiguous between various distinct readings?

It is a not sufficiently acknowledged fact that nominal generics obtain an additional reading when modified by event adjectives (von Stechow & Heim 1999; cf. also Carlson 1977).

- (3) John is a good teacher.

In (3), in addition to the reading present also in the unmodified nominal, which entails that John *is* a teacher (Lawler (1972) dubbed such generics as “occupational”), there emerges another reading, which can be roughly paraphrased as “whenever John teaches, he does so well”. This reading does not entail that John is a teacher, nor does it say anything about how regularly John teaches. It merely states that John *is good at teaching*. Moreover, there is yet another difference. While on what Lawler called “occupational” reading, *good* may modify an event different than *teaching*, i.e., (3) may mean that John is a teacher and he is good at, say, playing chess (Hare 1957; Beesley 1982; Croft 1984), such context-variability of the modified event is impossible on the other, entailment-less reading: the reading “whenever John teaches, he does so well” implies that John *teaches* well and not something else. Theories of event-modifying adjectives developed in Larson (1998) and Egg (2008) do not discuss this difference in interpretations. Furthermore, it remains unclear why the “entailment-less” reading is unavailable for the unmodified nominal in *John is a teacher*.

3. What is necessary in order to form a well-formed nominal generic?

In contrast to the nominal generics in (1b), some *-er* nominals cannot form a well-formed generic on their own, cf. (4a). In order to do so, they need the presence of an additional pre-nominal modifier, cf. (4b).

- (4) a. #John is an eater / sleeper / riser / breather.
b. John is an {quick, meat} eater / {calm, day} sleeper / early riser / {shallow, mouth} breather.

Any proposal that suggests to account for the oddness of (4a) in terms of semantic incompleteness (Carlson 1989; McConnell-Ginet 1994; – in fact existing analyses are only concerned with “modifier-needy” habituals but not *-er* nominals, however the situations are analogous) leaves unexplained why analogous cases in (1) are fine (but cf. Erteschik-Shir & Rapoport 1997; Goldberg & Ackerman 2001, for pragmatic accounts).

Analysis

The proposed analysis builds on the following background assumptions:

- The generic quantifier is a universal null Q-adverb over events or individuals with a special modal character which is expressed as universal quantification over accessible worlds (cf. Krifka et al. 1995).
- In order to be informative, utterances require an information focus (Rooth 1992; É. Kiss 1998), i.e., there must be a set of alternative propositions that contrast with the asserted proposition (cf. also Cohen 1999).

Based on these assumptions, I argue that *all* generics require the presence of a contrast (including unrestricted generics, contrary to Cohen’s (2004) theory of existential generics), but there are two potential places to introduce a set of alternatives: either restricting the quantification over worlds, or restricting the quantification over events (I do not consider kind generics here). This determines the type of generalization: **dispositional** vs. **inductive** respectively. In more detail:

- In *dispositional generics* the contrast is introduced insofar as the set of accessible worlds is restricted to those in which the individual in question has a dispositional property in virtue of which the generalization over events is made (i.e., there are other worlds in which the individual has no such property) (cf. Greenberg (2003) and Lekakou (2005), for similar proposals for kind generics and middles; cf. also Cohen’s (2010) stereotypical ordering source). E.g., one is a teacher in virtue of having it as an occupation and a snorer in virtue of having a respective physical disposition. Such dispositional properties, being temporally stable, are **incompatible with additional restrictions** over events (contrary to a common belief this equally holds for verbal dispositions as well), hence (5a). By contrast, restrictions of the entire state denoted by the dispositional property can be acceptable, cf. (5b).

- (5) a. #John is a teacher when he is nervous.
b. John is a teacher when he lives in France (but a typist when he lives in Italy).

- In *inductive generics* the contrast is introduced via a restriction over events. In other words, generalizations not based on a dispositional property **have to have a specified restrictor** over events, since otherwise a contrast is missing (it may be implicit, being provided by the context, but has to be there).

Equipped with this theory of generics, the questions raised above will be given the following answers:

1. Contra Cohen (2010), I argue that nominal and verbal generics in (1) – being unrestricted – equally express dispositional generalizations. Yet, they are not fully semantically identical – the difference shows up once they are modified. Unlike in habituals, the event variable available for additional modification in *-er* nominals on what Lawler called “occupational” reading is not necessarily the one introduced morphologically. Therefore, this reading of (3) gets the following semantic representation (with an abbreviated modal part):

- (6) a. **Gen** e, e' [$C(j, e) \ \& \ C(j, e')$] [**teach**(j, e) & **good**(e')] (w.r.t. some contextually relevant event)
b. **Gen** e, e' [$C(j, e) \ \& \ C(j, e')$] [**teach**(j, e) & **good**(e') & $e = e'$] (w.r.t. teaching)

2. Furthermore, I suggest that the reading “whenever John teaches, he does so well” discussed in the introduction emerges as a result of a repartitioning of the quantificational structure such that **teach** is moved to the restrictor due to focus accenting (cf. Partee 1995; Herburger 2000, for focus effects on the restriction-scope partitioning of quantificational structures):

- (6) c. **Gen** e, e' [**teach**(j, e) & $C(j, e')$] [**good**(e') & $e = e'$]

The proposed semantic representation in (6c) accounts for the properties of this entailment-less reading: (1) lack of entailment – **teach** is shifted to the restrictor; (2) unavailability of such reading for unmodified nominals – there would be nothing to fill in the scope as **teach** is moved to the restrictor; (3) restrictedness to teaching events – the variant without $e = e'$ is ruled out as it would lead to vacuous quantification over e . Unlike the dispositional readings represented in (6a) and (6b), the reading in (6c) expresses a restricted and hence inductive generalization, which is thus compatible with further restrictions, cf. (7):

- (7) John is a good teacher when he is not nervous.

3. Finally, unrestricted nominal generics in (4a) are odd/uninformative because a dispositional property is missing (all humans eat, sleep, etc.), and hence a contrast is not established from either of the two sources.