ON THE GENERIC IN ENGLISH

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I

– Introductory –

The term "generic" has been used in a number of constructs in English: Generic Person, Generic Number, Generic Present, Generic Restrictive Relative, and so on.

Jespersen (1933, p. 150ff) speaks of a generic person which vaguely compromises all persons. It is represented on the surface by *one, he, his, himself, you, we,* and *they.*

(1) *One* always finds *oneself* embarrassed when he is in a situation which highlights his stupidity.

(2) *You* can never tell about such things.

(3) *We* live to learn.

Jespersen (1931, §2.1) also draws a line between generic and non-generic present tense. Non-generic present is exemplified by (4) and generic present by (5).

(4) He is ill.

(5) None but the brave deserves the fair.

Further, Jespersen (1931, §5.1ff) applies the term generic to some restrictive relatives which occur with personal and demonstrative pronouns:

(6) He that fights and runs away may live to fight another day.

(7) Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

Finally, Jespersen (1933, pp. 212-214) uses the term "generic number" and "generic article". He notes that an assertion can be made to apply to a whole species or class, explicitly by the use of *every, any,* or *all,* or implicitly by certain combinations of definite/indefinite article with singular / plural nouns. And he classifies the above implicit uses into five. (1)

(i) No article, singular:

(8) Blood is thicker than water.

(9) Man is mortal.

(ii) Indefinite article, singular (it may be considered a weaker *any*):

(10) An oak is hardier than a beech.

(iii) Definite article, singular:

(11) The early bird catches the worm.

(1) *The* with plurals should be omitted here because the construction is not widespread in English if acceptable at all. Note that the following is not generally understood generically.
The elephants are huge animals.
cf. Stockwell et al. (1973, p. 84) and Perlmutter (1968, footnote (10)).

(iv) No article, plural [1]:

(12) Dogs are vigilant.

In sum, the surface forms of generics are *a, the,* and ϕ.

It is true, as has so far been said, that each of *a, the,* and ϕ, followed by a noun, serves as a marker of genericness. This construction is sometimes called "Nominal Generics". There is another construction which refers to repetition of activities, and it can be called "Verbal Generics". [2] This includes constructions like those underlined in (13) – (16):

(13) Bill *walks to school.*

(14) Harry's dog *bites.*

(15) John *drinks beer.*

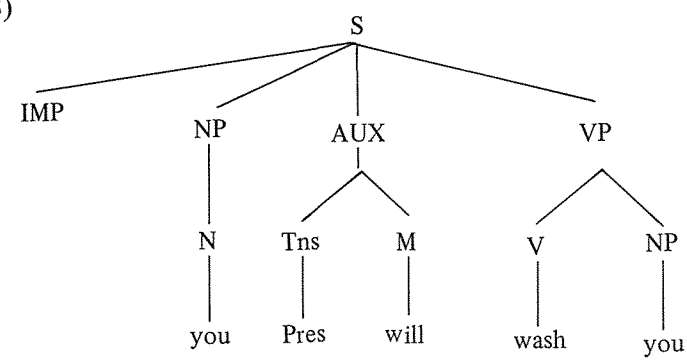
(16) Mary *teaches kindergarten.*

But it may be more reasonable to assume that genericness is not a characteristic of nouns or verbs but of sentences. In fact Chapin (1967), for example, considers genericness a mood like IMPERATIVE which determines which base structures are admissible.

(17) Wash yourself

The underlying structure of (17) will be (18):

(18)



What is meant by "generics" here is a sentence to be used to make a generic proposition or predication: i.e. a proposition or predication which says something, not about this or that group of things or about any particular individual thing, but about the class of things as such.

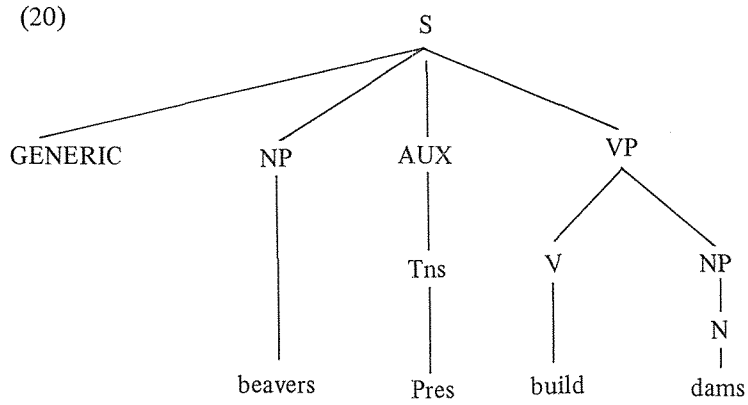
(19) Beavers build dams.

It is not odd to assume that there will be such an underlying structure as (20) for (19):

(1) This construction is more commonly used than the others, (ii) and (iii), partly because it can be used *generically* without any constraints: 'I like dogs' –'*I like a dog', 'Mommoths browsed on twigs and leaves' –'*A mommoth browsed on twigs and leaves'.

(2) Lawler (1973).

(20)



'Dam-building' is one of the attributes of 'beavers', and the whole sentence 'beavers build dams' is a generic sentence.

II

– Redundancy –

Smith (1964) makes a point which is fundamental to the problem of genericness, namely that at least with the generic article *the,* there are no purely distributable properties which distinguish generic from non-generic. We will therefore pursue genericness purely from a semantic point of view.

(21) Whales are animate.

(22) The (1) whale is animate.

(23) A whale is animate.

(21), (22), and (23) can be interpreted as generic sentences since they are used to make an assertion about a whole species or class of whales which is equally applicable to each member of the class.

In modern grammars nouns are specified as a set of subcategorial features in lexicon. The word 'whale', for instance, can be decomposed into designative categories as follows:

whale [+ COMMOM] [+COUNT] [+ANIMATE] [-HUMAN]

Note that the sentence (24) is semantically anomalous.

(24) My brother is a man. (not in the sense of 'grown-up')

(1) Quirk et al. (1972, p. 148 Note) consider (d) questionable as generic since the indefinite form seems to imply 'If they exist', while the definite form implies 'extant'.
(a) Dwarfs are a polular theme in literature.
(b) Hobgoblins are a popular theme in literature.
(c) The dwarf is a popular theme in literature.
(d) ?The Hobgoblin is a popular theme in literature.

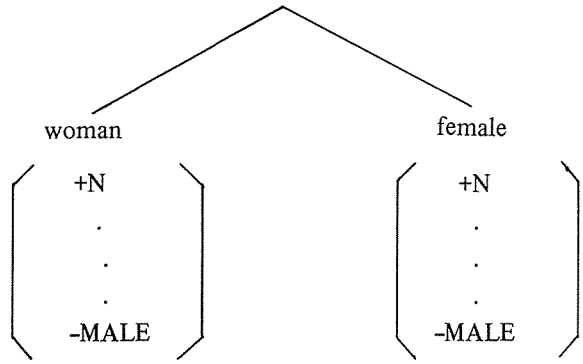
The synonymy of (24) and (25) becomes apparent when 'brother' and 'man' are decomposed into designative categories:

(25) My MALE SIBLING is a MALE.

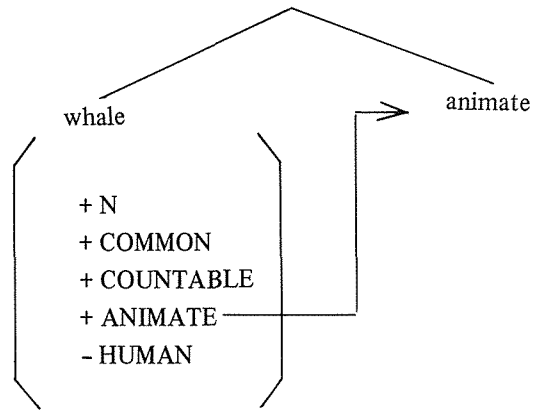
In short, (24) is a tautological or redundant sentence just as

(26) The woman is a female.

is a tautology. The lexical terms, 'woman' and 'female', share the same feature, [-MALE].



Tautology or redundancy arises, roughly speaking, when the information contained in an argument of a proposition includes the information contained in the remainder of the proposition. Considered in this way, (21), (22), and (23) are all tautological or redundant propositions as shown below:



(27) Whales are common.
(27') The/A whale is common.
(28) Whales are countable.
(28') The/A whale is countable.
(29) Whales are not human.
(29') The/A whale is not human.

Here, we can assert that generics are tautological or redundant propositions. When a conceptual (or subcategorial) feature is introduced into a generic proposition, the whole proposition is the so-called "analytic sentence". The sentence of this kind is different from the "synthetic sentence" like (30) in that the former does not contain any new information.

(30) His father is kind.

Leech (1974, p. 10ff) breaks down 'meaning' into seven different ingredients. He gives primary importance to logical (= conceptual, cognitive, denotative) meaning because it has a complex and sophisticated organization of a kind which may be compared with, and cross-related to, similar organization on the syntactic and phonological levels of language. In particular he points to two structural principles that seem to lie at the basis of all language patterning; one of the principles is that of contrastiveness. The conceptual meanings of a language seem to be organized largely in terms of contrastive features. If the word *woman,* for example, is defined conceptually as [+HUMAN, -MALE, +ADULT], then these three properties must provide a criterion of the correct use of that word. These contrastive features, translated into 'real world' terms, become attributes of the referent. If we borrow Leech's term, we can define (27) ~ (29') as 'conceptual' generic propositions.

Another ingredient pointed out by Leech is connotative meaning, which is the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual context. There is a multitude of additional, non-criterial properties that we have learned to expect a referent of a word, say, *woman* to possess. They include not only physical characteristics such as

biped, having a womb, having breast, . . .

but also psychological and social properties such as

gregarious, subject to maternal instinct, . . .

and may extend to features which are merely typical rather than invariable connotative of womanhood:

capable of being talkative, experienced in cookery, skirt- or dress-wearing, . . .

Still further, connotative meaning can embrace the putative properties of the referent, due to the view point adopted by an individual, or a group of people or a whole society. So in the past woman has been burdened with such attributes as the dominant male has been pleased to imposed on her:

frail, prone to tears, cowardly, emotional, irrational, inconstant, . . .

as well as with more becoming qualities such as

gentle, compassionate, sensitive, hard-working, ...

Connotative meanings or features are

1. relevant to the real world,
2. apt to vary from individual to individual, from society to society, from country to country, from age to age; relatively unstable; considerably variable according to culture, historical period, and the experience of the individual, and therefore
3. indeterminate and open-ended in a sense in which the conceptual meaning or feature is not.

In sum, conceptual meaning is intrinsic or innately determined, and allowance for exceptions cannot be made: When we say "Whales are animate", it implies that there is no single whale that is not animate. Connotative meaning, on the other hand, is extrinsic: when one says generically "Women are gregarious", another may say, "No. I know some who keep to their own company."

From what has so far been said, we can consider that generics are divided into two types, though both types are redundant propositions.

I. conceptual or analytic generics; or true generics in the sense that no exception is admissible.
II. connotative or synthetic generics; or quasi-generics in the sense that exceptions are admissible.

III

– Exception –

Below are examples of the connotative generic proposition.

(31) Lions are friendly beasts.
(32) The lion is a friendly beast.
(33) A lion is a friendly beast.

Some believe that (31), (32), and (33) are generic propositions and others doubt it. The status of generic propositions is philosophically controversial. The proposition expressed by (31), (32), and (33) under the intended interpretation of them would normally be formalized within the framework of the predicate-calculus as

(34) (x) (Lx → Fx)

(34) indicates "for all values of x, if x is a lion, then x is friendly". According to Lyons (1977 Vol. 1, pp. 194 - 195), the formulae like (34), involving universal quantification, do not seem to capture the meaning of generic propositions:

(i) From one point of view, (34) is too strong in that it is falsifiable by the discovery of but a single unfriendly lion.
(ii) From the other point of view, (34) is too weak in that it would represent the proposition as true if it just happened to be the case, as a matter of contingent fact, that all of the extant lions were friendly.

Truly, (i) seems to be logical and convincing because it is possible to find unfriendly lions. Still (31), (32), and (33) express more than mere generalizations. And we can assert that (i) does not falsify the genericness which (31), (32), and (33) possess. Below is a conversation about children between two mothers.

Mother A: I don't love children, though I have two.
Mother B: Even if so, mothers love children.

Seemingly, the very existence of Mother A may be a counterexample to Mother B's generic proposition 'Mothers love children'. But it happens only in the real world. Mother B is thinking of the whole class 'Mothers' without any special reference to specific mothers. In Mother B's mind, there is an idea that all mothers love children. Semantically, in her mind, the lexical item *mother* contains the feature [+love children]. Probably there is no boundary between conceptual meaning and connotative meaning in her mind. According to Nunberg and Pan (1975),

(35) A scout is thrifty.

appears to be making a claim about what scouts should be, not what they are. Also in Mother B's proposition, the prescriptive reading is possible: what mothers are expected to be.

Note the following example.

(36) Elephants have a horn.

Probably (36) will be considered unacceptable. The reason might be sought in the fact that there is not a single elephant that has a horn, and no one therefore has seen such an elephant. In our everyday life no one will predict the utterance of such a proposition because it is beyond imagination to incorporate such a property [+horn] in the lexical term *elephant* as a contingent feature not to mention as an intrinsic or essential feature. But such a sentence as (36) might occur when the speaker has no right knowledge of elephants. A person who has never seen a real elephant and wrongly believes, influenced by fables or science fictions, that elephants have a horn may be the speaker of (36). In his mind elephants have a horn.

Again,

(31) Lions are friendly beasts.

In the real world, individual lions are touchable and concrete beings while in generic propositions the noun in the subject position does not refer to any touchable and concrete being. From the 'real world' experience, the speaker gets knowledge of attributes of a particular individual lion and extends it to the whole class.

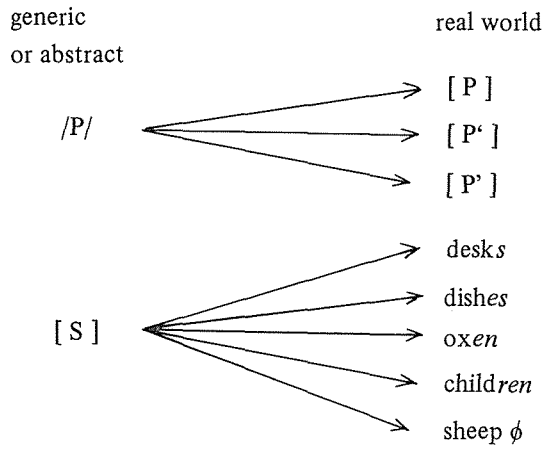
(37) All lions are friendly beasts.

One can assert that (31) and (37) are synonymous: (37) might be a generic proposition since it denotes that there is not a single unfriendly lion, but it should rather be considered an assertion in which the speaker is talking about 'real-world' lions. There is no counter-example of an unfriendly lion in (37): any one lion is friendly.

(38) *All lions are animate.

(38) is unacceptable because the conceptual feature cannot occur with the quantifier 'all'. At any rate, the proposition with 'all' cannot be considered generic. Conversely the generic proposition is one that refers to abstractness of something.

The relation between 'lion' in (31) and 'lions' in (37) is similar to that between a phoneme and its allophone or a morpheme and its allomorph:



/P/ and [S] are abstract forms while the forms on their right side are their concrete realizations. From the reason mentioned above, to assert that (31), (32), and (33) are falsifiable by the discovery but a single unfriendly lion is to confuse the generic or abstract world with the real world. Therefore (i) is a statement relevant to the real world rather than to the generic proposition.

The following examples are quoted from Lawler (1972).

(39) A symphony has four movements.

(40) A madrigal is popular.

Lawler (1972) asserts that (39) is acceptable while (40) is not as a generic sentence because in generic propositions the property predicated must be intrinsic or inately determined for the individual(1). It seems that he asserts that whereas the feature [+four-movement] can easily be incorporated in the lexical item 'symphony', the lexical item 'madrigal' can not be considered to be specified in lexicon as [+popular]. Here he seems to confuse the real world with the generic world. When one utters (40), at least in the speaker's mind the lexical item 'madrigal' is specified as [+popular], whether or not it is merely a contingent property of madrigals or even if the proposition (40) might be false in the real world. What has so far been argued will be shown in the diagram below.

(1) Does 'individual' refer to the speaker or the hearer? If it refers to the hearer, Lawler can be right: it is highly possible that some hearers will think of a three-movement symphony or an unpopular madrigal. It is because both of the predicated features are not conceptual but connotative or variable from individual to individual. In any case, 'hearer' and 'speaker' must be taken into consideration in the study of generics.

generic world	real world
LION BE FRIENDLY →	all ⋮ many ⋮ one no one — lion(s) is (are) (1) friendly

(1) It is significant that even though generics indicate a class of things semantically, the surface form has relevance for number agreement in the verb.

IV

– CONDITIONS –

(I) Timeless

Generics are timeless propositions just like the so-called eternal truths of mathematics and theology; they cannot occur with deictic adverbs or particles of time such as 'now', 'then', 'recently', 'soon', and so on. We can say

(41) She is kind.

(42) She is being kind today.

In (41), the predicate refers to the universality or eternity of the subject while in (42) the predicate refers to the temporal state of the subject. We can not say

(43) *She is kind today.

The universal state does not occur with deictic adverbials. Generics are propositions for which the question of time-reference simply does not arise: the situation or state-of-affair which they describe is outside time altogether. Therefore it is odd to say, as a generic proposition,

(44) *Beavers build dams recently.

In addition, there is another proposition called "omnitemporal", one that says that something has been, is, and always will be so. Hence it might be argued that generic propositions are not only timeless but omnitemporal.

(II) Aspectless

Whereas tense is a deictic category, which involves an explicit or implicit reference to the time of utterance, aspect is non-deictic. Generics are expressed characteristically by sentences in the simple present but not in progressive or perfect tense. Generic propositions being timeless are not only tenseless, but also aspectless.

(45) Beavers build dams.

(46) *Beavers are building dams.

(47) *Beavers have built dams.

(48) *Beavers have been building dams.

Perlmutter (1968, Note 10. xix) says that the sentence

(49) Beavers are increasing in numbers

is acceptable as a generic sentence since the plural subject predicates something of the entire group or class rather than of any individual in it. His assertion is right so far as the plural subject is concerned. Certainly, (49) can imply that all beavers are increasing in number without a single exception. But (49) can not be regarded as a generic sentence. The subject itself can be a generic NP but the whole sentence can not be generic. It is rather odd to say that the lexical item *beaver* can be specified as [+increase in number], and so the sentence "Beavers are building dams now" could not be acceptable as a generic proposition. Similarly,

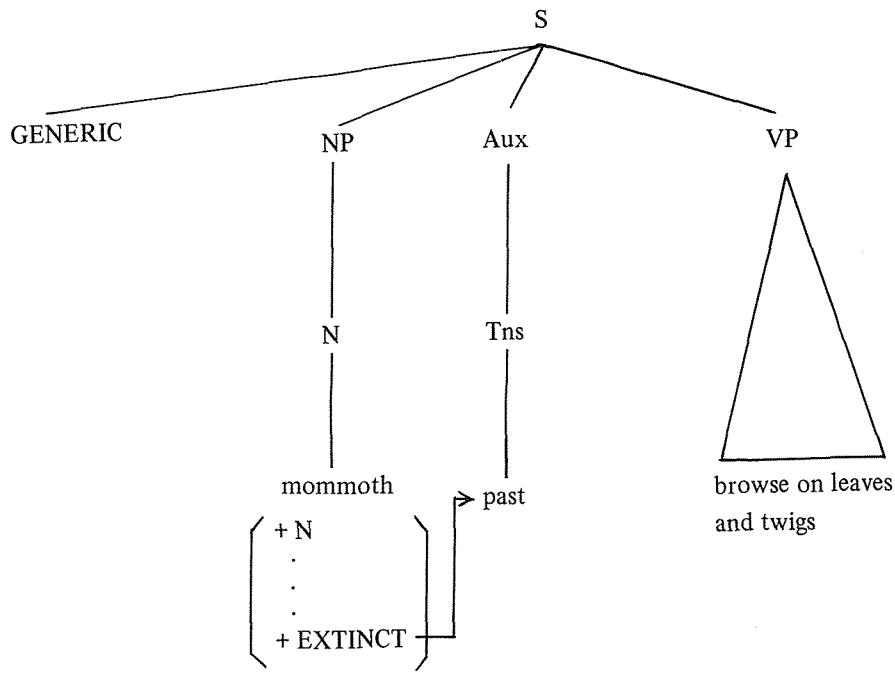
(50) *Beavers are building dams these days.

can not be a generic sentence because generics are timeless and aspectless, though Perlmutter says (50) is a generic sentence.

Although generics are expressed in the simple present, we can say

(51) Mommoths browsed on leaves and twigs.

Here it is important to re-emphasize that generic propositions are not only tenseless but timeless. This statement can not be refuted by pointing to the possibility of uttering such sentences as (51) in order to assert what is a generic proposition. The past tense that occurs in (51) is not part of the proposition that is expressed when (51) is used to assert a generic proposition. In such circumstances, it is inappropriate to ask when it was that mommoths browsed on leaves and twigs: the past tense is employed only because the speaker knows or believes that mommoths are extinct, but not because he thinks that all monmoths have changed their property. The lexical item *mommoth* contains such a feature as [+EXTINCT], which can be realized as the past morpheme:



(III) Time Adverbials

Generic propositions do not denote pastness, presentness, or futurity or any other deictic notion. Therefore it is odd to say

(52) *Mommoths browsed on leaves and twigs yesterday.

(53) *Mommoths browsed on leaves and twigs 1,000 years ago.

Verbs in the past tense ordinarily do not yield generic propositions by themselves, but they do only with appropriate adverbials:

(54) Mommoths browsed on leaves and twigs in prehistoric times.

(55) Mommoths browsed on leaves and twigs a long time ago.

The reason why (52) and (53) are unacceptable and (54) and (55) are acceptable seems to lie in the difference between, for example, 'yesterday' and 'in prehistoric times'. The difference between them is that the former denotes a definite point of time, while the latter a non-definite length of time. The adverbial denoting a non-definite length of time, when combined with a verb in the past tense, can make the proposition generic. 'Formerly', 'previously, historically', in the past', 'in ancient times', 'in the old days', 'way back', 'in time immemorial', 'of yore', and so on can work in the same way as 'in prehistoric times' and 'a long time ago'. The sentences below are generic since appropriate adverbials are added to them.

(56) Mommoth fought with saber-tooth tigers in prehistoric times.

(57) The mommoth fought with saber-tooth tigers in prehistoric times.

But the indefinite article cannot occur in the same construction:

(58) *A mommotn fought with saber-tooth tigers in prehistoric times.

(58) is not acceptable as a generic sentence since what is in focus in (58) is the object of the verb 'saber-tooth tigers' and the genericness in the generic indefinite article disappears. And the subject 'a mommoth' is felt specific.(1)

(IV) Conjunctions

Two types of noun phrases can be conjoined with *and* in the subject position to yield sentences like

(59) The beaver and the otter build dams.

(60) Beavers and otters build dams.

The generic indefinite articles can not be conjoined with *and* in the same way

(61) *A beaver and an otter build dams.

On the other hand, we find, unlike (61), that *or* can yield generic propositions like

(62) A beaver or an otter builds dams.

(V) Modifiers

A question which arises next is whether or not the subject noun phrase with a modifier can be taken as generic.

(63) Dogs are unattractive.

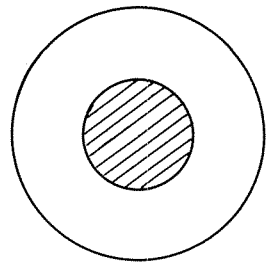
(64) *Short-tailed dogs are unattractive.

(65) Mothers love children.

(66) *Mothers in Japan love children.

Some may assert that (64) and (66) can be acceptable as generics for the reason that both subject noun phrases can refer to all short-tailed dogs and all mothers in Japan respectively. But generics are propositions which are made to apply to a whole species or a class while modified noun phrases do not refer to the entire group or class. The classes specified by such noun phrases are narrowed down to smaller sub-classes, which is shown by the smaller shaded circle below.

(1) I owe much to Mr. Stephen A. C. Boyd, Professor at Osaka University, in the analysis of this type of sentence. Perlmutter also asserts that the sentence like (58) is not generic, but he only says that the unacceptability of the sentence with *a* is paralleled by that of the sentence with *any*.



This figure shows that 'short-tailed dogs' and 'mothers in Japan' may give rise to a question like "How about long-tailed dogs?" and "How about mothers in another country?" This is true of such a restrictive relative clause as (67):

(67) Dogs that have a short tail are unattractive.

(67) implies the existence of dogs that do not have a short tail. Unlike the generic sentence "Dogs are unattractive', (67) can bring us into the real world and make us conscious of the existence of other kinds of dogs, for example, long-tailed dogs. Generics should be more abstract.

Stockwell et al. (1973, p. 90) say that generic noun phrases containing restrictive relatives do seem to occur, by giving an example like

(68) A gorilla that lives in Africa is usually bigger than one that lives in a zoo.

"Dogs that have a short tail" and "a gorilla that lives in Africa" are different from each other if we consider them semantically. Whereas the former implies "dogs that do not have a short-tail", the latter does not suggest "a gorilla that does not live in Africa". "Gorillas" are animals peculiar to Africa. They live and are found only in Africa. Even if they are transported abroad into zoological gardens, the lexical item *gorilla* can possess the feature [+in Africa] .

There may be no novelty in suggesting that nonrestrictive clauses do not spoil the genericness of propositions.

(69) Snakes, which move with deceptive speed, are one of the most feared animals.

(70) *Snakes which shed their skins annually are poisonous.

V

– CONCLUSION –

We have so far pursued generic propositions from a semantic point of view. Our conclusion is:

(1) Generics are redundant or tautological propositions.

(2) Genericness is not a characteristic of nouns or verbs but of sentences: genericness is considered a mood like IMP. Generic propositions are tenseless, timeless, and aspectless. In "I like dogs", for example, 'dogs' is a generic noun, but the whole sentence does not denote any genericness of the subject.

(3) Generic propositions involve universal quantification. When one says, "A symphony

has four movements", the existence of a three-movement symphony does not falsify the proposition. In the speaker's mind, all symphonies have four movements and no counter-example can exist. Even if the hearer thinks of a counter-example, the existence of a three-movement symphony is a phenomenon relevant to the real world. Generics are abstractly generic.

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