

Suspicious Minds: Genericity with epistemic effects

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This talk concerns generalizations that are expressed by characterizing generic sentences (in the sense of Krifka et al. 1995). Specifically, it explores the contribution of different verb forms to their interpretation. The main empirical focus is on the expression of characterizing genericity in Czech (West Slavic). Just as other languages with a grammatical perfective/imperfective distinction, so too in Czech imperfective forms are often used to convey characterizing genericity in a suitable context, but in Czech perfective forms are also commonly used for this purpose. Besides such (im)perfective verb forms, which are formally unmarked for genericity, in Czech characterizing generic statements can be expressed by generic forms that are marked with the verbal suffix *-va-* (its standard citation form). This suffix is used in addition to other lexical means for the expression of genericity, such as adverbs of quantification (e.g., *obvyčejně* 'usually').

The Czech generic suffix cannot be confounded with the imperfective suffix, from which it differs formally and semantically. Most importantly, the generic suffix can only be attached to imperfective verb stems and derives imperfective forms that enforce only a generic (stative) interpretation of a sentence in all its occurrences, ruling out any episodic interpretations: e.g., (i) *zapisovat* (secondary imperfective formally marked with the imperfective suffix) 'to write down', 'to be writing down' > *zapisovávat* 'to write down' (gen), *psát* (primary imperfective, formally unmarked for imperfectivity) 'to write', 'to be writing' > *psávat* 'to write' (gen)). Moreover, the generic suffix has formal and semantic properties clearly prohibiting its classification as a marker of aspect or tense, contrary to some proposals.

The expression of characterizing generic statements by means of specifically generic forms, besides formally unmarked ones, is not uncommon across natural languages (e.g. Swahili, Arabic, see Dahl 1985, 1995). One question that this raises is: How do we motivate the use of formally marked generic forms to express characterizing generics, when they can also be expressed by related forms that are unmarked for genericity?

For Czech, as I will argue, the answer must include the speaker's stance on exceptions to the generically-predicated property. While there are characterizing generic sentences that hold without exceptions (for all we know), such as *The Sun rises in the East* / *Slunce vychází na východě*, most are compatible with exceptions or non-conforming cases to the expressed generalization, which is taken to be one of their most interesting and puzzling features. For instance, we judge *Birds fly* / *Ptáci létají* to be true despite the existence of flightless bird species like penguins, and *Birds lay eggs* / *Ptáci snášejí vejce* is judged to be true even if the majority of birds do not lay eggs (only adult female birds do).

As far as Czech formally marked generic verbs are concerned, their use involves the following epistemic effect: namely, they signal that the speaker's epistemic state is incompatible with categorical absence of exceptions or non-confirming cases to the expressed generalization. A basic piece of evidence in support of this idea comes from the observation that the generic suffix *-va-* is unacceptable or odd with statements for which the issue of exceptions does not arise, because they are known to be exceptionless, or at least are intended to be so used. These include analytical truths (1a),

normative (non-descriptive) generalizations, such as constitutive and regulative rules (1b), and unrealized dispositions (2b):

- (1) a. Trojúhelník { má/#mívá } tři strany. b. V Anglii se jezdí/#jezdívá po levé straně.
triangle {has/#has.GEN} three sides in England REFL drives/#drive.GEN on left side
'A triangle {has/#usually has} three sides.' 'In England, one drives on the left side of the road.'
- (2) a. Tento stroj drtí pomeranče. b. Tento stroj drtívá pomeranče.
this machine crushes oranges this machine crush.GEN oranges
'This machine crushes oranges 'This machine (usually) crushes oranges
...but we have not used it yet.' # ...but we have not used it yet.'

The generic suffix *-va-* is best suited for the expression of descriptive (inductive) generalizations, and specifically for generalizations that commonly have exceptions. The speaker then may use the generic suffix to convey the following epistemic stances: either (i) the speaker is uncertain or genuinely ignorant about the facts that ground the generalization, and may wish to avoid the possible implication of commitment to no exceptions whatsoever (and hence to false or misleading claims) which would be sanctioned by corresponding unmarked generic forms, or (ii) the speaker is certain that there are exceptions or non-confirming cases to the expressed generalization; here a special subcase involves the speaker's knowledge of known positive counterinstances (i.e., positive concrete alternatives to a given generic property, such as hardbacks to paperbacks), which requires that the generic statement be overtly marked:

- (3) a. Knihy #jsou brožované. b. Knihy bývají brožované.
books #are paperback books are.GEN paperback
'Books #are paperbacks.' 'Books tend to be /usually are paperbacks.'

Consequently, the resulting relationship between un/-marked generics in Czech is reminiscent of other un/-marked pairs elsewhere in the grammar of natural languages, where the role of the marked form is to convey epistemic effects. For instance, in pairs like *three/at least three* the modified numeral gives rise to ignorance inferences. Other examples are easy to find: ordinary/epistemic indefinites (e.g. *ein* vs. *irgendein* in German), or ordinary/epistemic numbers (*twenty* vs. *twenty-some*).