

## The generic article

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### Abstract

We take a fresh look at the connection between genericity and (in)definiteness by reconsidering a long-standing puzzle concerning the relation between definiteness and genericity. We contrast English on the one hand and Romance languages and Hungarian on the other, focusing on generic sentences involving plurals. The two language groups differ in that English uses indefinite bare plurals in generic generalizations ('Dogs are intelligent') and in kind-level NPs ('Dinosaurs are extinct') while the other group uses definite plurals in both these cases ('Les chiens sont intelligents', 'Les dinosaurs sont éteints'). We argue that this difference is due to the existence of a competition between definite and indefinite forms in generic environments. The contrast results from the fact that the relevant parameters are weighed differently in different languages. The analysis is formulated in terms of O(ptimality) T(heory). It predicts both the overlap and the disparity in article choice for the languages under consideration.

### 1. The Puzzle

We review in this section the data patterns we set out to account for. The two language groups we are contrasting are English (as well as other Germanic languages such as Dutch) on the one hand, and Romance languages and Hungarian on the other.

#### *Non-generic environments*

The languages we are interested in use definite and indefinite articles, and have singular and plural forms. The indefinite article is often absent in plural forms, but for simplicity's sake we treat these bare plural forms on a par with indefinites with an article. There are many interesting differences between the languages under consideration concerning definiteness and number in non-generic environments, but here we exemplify the similarities. We observe that definite forms are uniformly used with unique referents, such as (1) and familiar referents, such as (2), whether singular or plural. We exemplify with English and Hungarian:

- (1) a. The moon is round.                      b. The stars are shining.  
       A hold kerek.                                A csillagok csillognak.  
       the moon round                              the star.Pl shine.Pl
- (2) a. A man and a child came in. The man was tall.  
       Bejött egy férfi és egy gyerek. A férfi magas volt. [H]  
       in.com.Past a man and a child the man tall was
- b. Children and dogs were playing in the street. The children were noisy.  
       Gyerekek és kutyák játszottak az utcán. A gyerekek hangosak voltak. [  
       child.Pl and dog.Pl play.Past.Pl the street.on the child.Pl noisy.Pl were.Pl

In both Hungarian and English, bare plural forms are used with existential indefinite interpretations as in (2b) while French would require the indefinite article *des* here. We are glossing over this difference in what follows.

### *Generic environments*

The term ‘generic environment’ covers both sentences with direct kind reference and those involving generic generalizations. Both singular and plural forms are used in these environments. With singular NPs, there is no contrast: the languages in both groups use a definite singular for kind reference, as in (3), and an indefinite singular in generic generalizations, as in (4)<sup>1</sup>:

- (3) a. The dinosaur is extinct.  
 b. A dinoszaurusz kihalt.  
     the dinosaur      die.out.Past
- (4) a. A dog is dangerous when it is hungry.  
 b. Egy kutya veszélyes mikor éhes.  
     a dog dangerous when hungry

Differences arise, however, in the plural case, where English-type languages use indefinite (bare) plural forms in generic environments, while Hungarian and Romance-type languages use definite plurals:

- (5) a. Dinosaurs are extinct.  
 b. A dinoszauruszok kihaltak.  
     the dinosaur.Pl      die.out.Past.Pl
- (6) a. Dogs are dangerous when they are hungry.  
 b. A kutyák veszélyesek mikor éhesek,  
     the dog.Pl dangerous.Pl when hungry.Pl

Our primary aim here is to account for the contrast between the (a) and (b) sentences of (5) and (6), while maintaining the similarities in (3) and (4). Before we give the analysis, we outline our background assumptions concerning generics, number, and (in)definiteness and number.

## **2. Background assumptions**

### *Genericity*

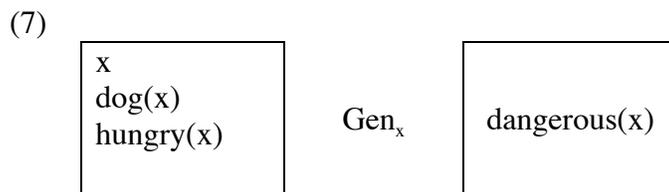
Since Carlson’s (1977) seminal work, bare plurals and the expression of genericity have been two intimately related issues in a literature too vast to review here. The issue of genericity and definiteness has been central to early works such as Gerstner and Krifka (1989), and more recently, Dayal (2004). The particular problem we are concerned with here has not been solved, although it has been discussed to some degree (cf. Vergnaud and Zubizarreta, Krifka et al. 1995, Longobardi 1994, 2001). Instead of envisaging a full review of the literature, we outline only those aspects of genericity that are of immediate relevance to us.

We assume that existential indefinite plurals, whether bare or not, exemplified in (2b) involve ordinary plural indefinites, bound by an external existential quantifier.

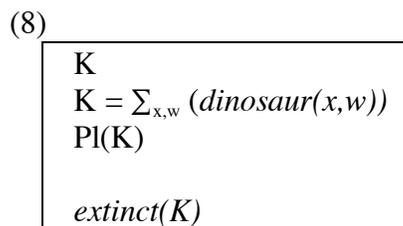
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<sup>1</sup> We disregard here the difference between essential and accidental generalizations.

With respect to singular generics, we follow Carlson’s original insight in treating the definite singular in (3) as referring to a special atom in the model, one that is kind-level. We follow Farkas and Sugioka (1983), Diesing (1992), Krifka et al. (1995) and others, in treating the indefinite singular in (4) as an ordinary indefinite, introducing a variable (or a discourse referent) unselectively bound by a silent generic operator  $Gen$  binding dog-sized situations which will be denoted by  $x$ . The sentences in (4) have the representation in (7), using DRT:<sup>2</sup>



Turning now to plurals, we assume that the subject in (5) denotes a kind as well. However, this is not the singleton atom but rather a constructed kind, constructed via a sum operator that groups all entities that fit the description, in all worlds. The sentences in (5) have the representation in (8), where  $\sum_{x,w} (dinosaur(x,w))$  creates a kind-level entity by summing up all entities in all worlds that are dinosaurs in those worlds:

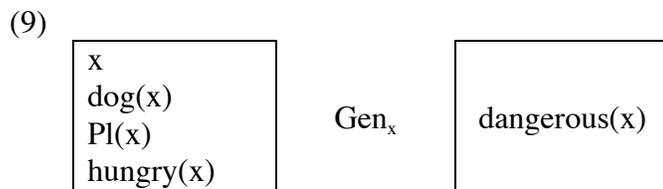


There are two ways of getting to kind-level entities in this system: either by referring to the atomic kind-level individual directly or via the  $\sum$  operator, which constructs a kind by summing up all its realizations in the model. The  $\sum$  operator is our analogue to the  $\cap$  operator in Chierchia and Dayal’s work, and is inspired by Ojeda’s (1991) approach.  $\sum$  operates on individual level entities and sums them up into their kind. The entity that results after application of  $\sum$  is the top node of the intensional lattice associated with the descriptive content of the NP. We denote it by  $K$  to distinguish it from ordinary atomic kinds  $k$  (which can form their own hierarchical structures in taxonomic interpretations). ‘Kind-level’ predicates like *extinct* are insensitive to the difference between atomic and derived kinds, as illustrated by the felicity of both (3) and (5).

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<sup>2</sup> Instead of direct binding of the individual variable, we could have adopted indirect binding, by introducing an event binding generic operator. In the case of ‘true’ generics we are discussing here, the two approaches are equivalent, as demonstrated by de Swart (1991, 1995). As we will see in section 3 below, we crucially need an event binding generic operator in pseudo-generic cases. For the true generics, we choose the simpler representation for convenience.

When it comes to (6), there are two possibilities: (i) we could treat the plural generic either as essentially analogous to (5) and explain away the mismatch between the kind level subject and the individual level predicate by having a realization operator in the semantics of the nominal or a lifting of the predicate (a neo-Carlsonian approach), or (ii) we could treat it as essentially analogous to (4) and assume a silent Gen binding the variable introduced by the plural subject (an unselective binding analysis). We follow here this latter option. The only difference between (4) and (6) is then the obvious one, namely number. The representation is given in (9):



### *Number interpretation*

We follow the treatment of number interpretation in Farkas and de Swart (2003) and Farkas (to appear) according to which singulars are semantically and morphologically unmarked for number, while plurals are morphologically marked by the feature [PI].<sup>3</sup> The atomic interpretation of singular NPs is the result of the fact that by default, assignment functions give discourse referents atomic values. The effect of the presence of the feature [PI] is to introduce a presupposed discourse referent that gets the predicate PI predicated of it, and to allow both atoms and groups as possible values for this referent. Crucially for us, the presence of [PI] opens up the whole lattice as the possible value domain for the relevant discourse referent.

An immediate consequence of this account is that an indefinite singular cannot be used as the subject of a kind-level sentence. We correctly predict that (10) can only have a taxonomic reading, in all languages under consideration.

(10) A dinosaur is extinct.

On the one hand, a singular indefinite will be interpreted as atomic and thus  $\Sigma$  cannot be involved in its interpretation. On the other hand, atomic kind reference is blocked by the fact that the definite singular gets this interpretation (cf. 3). The analysis we set up in terms of markedness accounts for these blocking effects.

### *(In)definiteness*

We are confining our attention here to languages that have definite and indefinite articles and ignore the difference between a bare plural indefinite (as exemplified for English and Hungarian above) and indefinites like those in (11), from French:

(11) Des enfants jouaient dans la rue.

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<sup>3</sup> A possible morpho-syntactic implementation of this idea is to have an equipollent morphosyntactic feature [PI] whose minus value has no semantic import.

Indef.PI child.PI play.IMP.PL in the street  
 Children were playing in the street.

For present purposes, we take it that an NP is definite when it is preceded by the definite article and it is indefinite if preceded by an indefinite article or when it is bare.

We follow a markedness approach to the definite/indefinite contrast (as in Hawkins 1991) and assume that indefiniteness is the unmarked case, while definites are special. We deal here only with the least marked of the definite markers, namely the definite article. The following two parameters are the basic features associated with definiteness: uniqueness, which we treat as Maximality of reference to cover plural nominals as well, and Familiarity. As an umbrella notion for these two parameters we adopt the dynamic notion of determined reference (from Farkas 2002). These parameters are relevant to discourse referents and appear as conditions of the form  $\text{Max}(x)$  and  $\text{Fam}(x)$ . For convenience, we will say an NP is maximal or familiar when the discourse referent the NP introduced is maximal or familiar respectively. The condition  $\text{Max}(x)$  requires  $x$  to range over all entities that satisfy the descriptive content in the relevant situation. In the absence of a plural condition this amounts to uniqueness in the situation of singulars. (We do not discuss here the complex issues involving the question of where and how uniqueness needs to be satisfied.)

Definite NPs impose determined reference on their discourse referent. Indefinite NPs do not impose any restrictions on their discourse referent. As a result, they are not incompatible with familiarity or maximality of the discourse referent *per se*. However, if we have the choice between the use of a definite or an indefinite article when referring to a discourse referent that is maximal and familiar, the definite article will be preferred as the best form in an optimality theoretic fashion (cf. section 3 below). In such a context, the use of an indefinite article will typically trigger lack of determined reference for the discourse referent by implicature. We find this contrast in episodic contexts like (11), where the use of the definite article would indicate uniqueness and familiarity, whereas the use of the indefinite article indicates non-uniqueness and non-familiarity (cf. Heim 1982 for a strong articulation of this view, and de Swart (2005) for the claim that this is really just an implicature). Interestingly, we also find this contrast in the context of singular generics, where the definite article is used for atomic kind reference in (3), whereas that meaning is blocked for the indefinite article in (10), because it carries the complementary features of non-uniqueness and non-familiarity.

The condition  $\text{Fam}(x)$  requires  $x$  to be familiar in the relevant situation or accommodatable therein. The atomic kind in (3) is familiar, because the singular definite NP refers to a well-established kind, as argued by Krifka et al. (1995). Discourse referents bound by Gen or  $\Sigma$  cannot be familiar because they are intensional and thereby open-ended. In episodic contexts, familiarity is frequently accommodated. We assume that bound discourse referents are not accommodatable. The non-familiarity of the subject NP in (5a) is due to the presence of  $\Sigma$  in (7) and the non-familiarity of the subject NP in (5) is due to the presence of Gen in (8). This view extends to the singular indefinite in (4), which is also non-familiar. However, non-

familiarity cannot be the only reason why we find a singular indefinite in this context, and not a definite, for Hungarian and Romance use definite plurals in comparable generic contexts, as illustrated by the contrast between (5a) and (5b). Note that the counterpart of (4) with a definite singular resists a generic interpretation in both English-type languages and Hungarian/Romance:

- (12)        a. The dog is dangerous when it is hungry.  
               b. Le chien est dangereux quand il a faim.    [French]

In our view, the generic reading of the definite singular in environments like (12) is blocked by the fact that in the case of singular nominals, definiteness requires the descriptive content to denote a singleton set. In contexts like (12) this results in having a singleton set as the restrictor of the Gen operator. However, a pragmatic restriction on the domain of quantification rules out such a configuration. As argued by de Swart (1991, 1995) singleton sets do not function as the domain of quantification of any quantifier, because it doesn't make sense to quantify over singleton sets. This pragmatic restriction rules out the generic reading of (12a) as well as (12b). Given that the definite article is not available as a proper choice in this environment, the indefinite article is used instead, in all languages under consideration.<sup>4</sup>

The argumentation set up so far to account for the distribution of definite and indefinite articles in combination with singular generic NPs is valid cross-linguistically, for we take the semantics of the definite and indefinite to be the same from one language to the next. However, the situation of plural generics is different. We do find cross-linguistic variation here, as illustrated in (5) and (6) above. Hungarian and Romance type languages use definite plurals to refer to kinds and to express generic generalizations, whereas English and Germanic languages use bare plurals in these environments. This contrast is a challenge for the analysis of genericity and definiteness set up so far. In section 3, we develop an account in terms of an Optimality Theoretic framework.

### 3. Account of contrasts in definiteness

In section 2, we set up an analysis of definiteness of a discourse-referent introducing NP as correlated with both familiarity and maximality properties of the discourse referent introduced. Our account of definiteness contrasts and genericity is expressed

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<sup>4</sup> Note that this view makes it impossible to view generic sentences such as (i) as involving unselective binding by a Gen operator:

- (i)        The coca cola bottle has long neck.  
 (ii)       Mary was sick.

We think that this is correct (cf. also Chierchia 1998, Dayal 2004). Of course there is a mismatch between the kind-denoting NP, and the individual-level predicate. The analysis of (i) involves 'lowering' of the kind denoting NP, or 'raising' of the predicate. We propose that this problem should be solved analogously to the mismatch between individuals and stages, we see in examples like (ii), but we will not elaborate this point here.

in an OT framework. This suggests a treatment of this correlation in terms of soft, rather than hard constraints. The connection between definiteness and maximality and familiarity is expressed by the two constraints in (13) and (14):

(13) *FaithMax*: Reflect maximality features of the input in the output.

(14) *\*Def/[-Fam]*: Avoid non-familiar definites.

These constraints are syntactic in that they are relevant to the mapping of meanings to forms. They govern the choice of a definite or an indefinite NP form for the speaker to express a certain meaning in a certain context. *FaithMax* is a faithfulness constraint that requires a maximal discourse referent to be associated with an NP with a definite article. *\*Def/[-Fam]* is a markedness constraint that penalizes the use of a definite article with non-familiar NPs.<sup>5</sup>

In episodic contexts, the presence of the definite article signals uniqueness and familiarity. If the former is not met, accommodation is possible under complex conditions we will not discuss here. What matters to us is that the constraints collaborate to determine the optimal form of the article (definite or indefinite) in episodic contexts. As argued in section 2 above, singular generics are similar. However, with plurals, a conflict arises between the two constraints, which leads to cross-linguistic variation.

We take the constraints in (13) and (14) to be universal and therefore valid in all languages under consideration. The contrast of interest here is due to different orderings of the two constraints. The two rankings are given here:

- *\*Def/[-Fam]* >> *FaithMax*                    [English]
- FaithMax* >> *\*Def/[-Fam]*                    [Romance, Hungarian]

We predict cross-linguistic stability in case of alignment of familiarity and maximality, and cross-linguistic instability in cases of non-familiar maximal referents. In such cases we predict English will use indefinite forms, while Hungarian/Romance will use definite ones.

The OT approach does not affect our treatment of generic singulars or indefinite plurals in episodic contexts (11). In generic sentences involving direct kind reference, such as (3), we correctly predict the stable use of definite forms, since the referent is maximal and familiar. In the generic generalizations where *Gen* binds a singular NP, as in (4), we correctly predict the use of an indefinite form because of a high-ranked constraint ruling out singleton restrictions of quantifiers. Plural generic sentences illustrated in (5) and (6) involve a contrast. In these cases the relevant discourse referent is maximal, because it ranges over the entire domain given by the descriptive content, but it denotes the top of a plural lattice, so its descriptive content is not a singleton set. As a result, it is potentially available for binding by a generic operator, and *FaithMax* would drive us towards the use of a definite article. At the same time, it is not familiar, and familiarity cannot be accommodated, because the plural kind is

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Beaver (2004) for a formulation of this insight as a faithfulness constraint.

constructed via  $\Sigma$  or bound by Gen. The constraint \*Def/[-Fam] would thus drive us to avoid the definite article. The conflict between the two constraints can only be resolved by according one a higher importance than the other. ‘High Familiarity’ languages, such as English, rank \*Def/[-Fam] above FaithMax, and use an indefinite form, while ‘high Maximality’ languages, such as Romance and Hungarian give priority to FaithMax, and use a definite one. We illustrate with the two tableaux below:

Tableau 1: indefinite generics (illustrated with English)

Meaning	Form	*Def/-fam	FaithMax
Gen <sub>x</sub> (Dog(x), Intellig(x), Pl(x)) [+Max] [-Fam]			
	Dogs are intelligent		*
	The dogs are intelligent	*	

Tableau 2: definite generics (illustrated with French)

Meaning	Form	FaithMax	*Def/-fam
Gen <sub>x</sub> (Dog(x), Intellig(x), Pl(x)) [+Max] [-Fam]			
	Des chiens sont intelligents	*	
	Les chiens sont intelligents		*

Both tableaux map a given input meaning to a number of candidate output forms. The input meaning is the same in both. It involves a discourse referent that has the features [+Max] and [-Fam]. The candidate output forms are definite or indefinite plurals. The choice of form is dictated by the ranking of the two constraints in the two languages. The case of plural generic subjects of kind level predicates is similar, except that there it is the presence of  $\Sigma$  that renders the relevant discourse referent non-familiar.

We now consider two further cases of interest, pseudo-genericity and anaphoric genericity, which lend support to the analysis we have presented so far.

#### 4. Pseudo-genericity

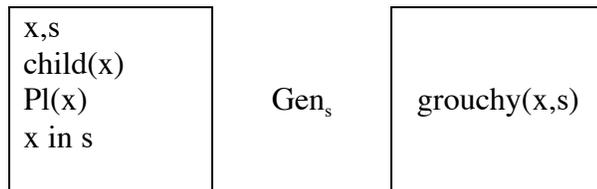
In ‘true’ generic generalizations such as (5) the generic operator binds the variable introduced by the plural subject indirectly, by binding minimal situations in which there is an entity or group of entities realizing the descriptive content. We indicated this by subscripting Gen with the individual variable. The variable in question became Maximal when plural exactly because the Gen operator forced it to range over an intensional domain while the plural opened up groups for possible referents. This operator ranges over an open-ended intensional set of minimal situations that have a dog or a group of dogs in them, and because the situations are minimal, there is a one-to-one relation between situations and individuals. We therefore include

present, past, future and possible dogs in (5b). It is, however, possible for the situation variable to be bigger and include more than just the relevant individual. In such cases the operator does no longer bind the individual variable. The one-to-one relation between situations and individuals is lost and the interpretation of the variable is existential. In this case the set of situations quantified over is maximal but the individual variable is a simple non-maximal existential. If the generic operator binds larger situations  $s$  in which dogs exist, the discourse referent contributed by the NP *dogs* will be non-maximal and non-familiar. We thus predict that the difference between the two types of languages discussed here is neutralized in pseudo-generic contexts in favor of the indefinite form. Such changes of form have been discussed in the literature: Longobardi (2002), Carlier (1989), Dobrovie-Sorin and Laca (2003), Dobrovie-Sorin (2004), Heyd (2003) have observed that we find *indefinites* in pseudo-generic contexts exemplified in (15) – (18) with French:

- (15) Des enfants malades sont grincheux.  
Indef-Pl children sick are grouchy
- (16) Des guêpes énervées sont un danger terrible.  
Indef-Pl wasps irritated are a danger terrible
- (17) Des grévistes peuvent ruiner une entreprise.  
Indef-Pl strikers can ruin a company.
- (18) Des jeunes filles doivent se montrer discrètes.  
Indef-Pl young girls have refl show discrete

We give in (19) the representation of the interpretation of (15):

(19) DRS for (15)



The discourse referent  $x$  is non-maximal in  $s$  because of the contribution of the stage-level predicate *sick*. In this case we collect all situations of sickness implicating children, which does not necessarily co-extend (luckily) with the set of children. Accordingly,  $x$  will be non-maximal and non-familiar, and therefore we predict the use of an indefinite form even in Hungarian/Romance, which is indeed what we find.

The French example in (15) has a counterpart in which the subject is definite:

- (20) Les enfants malades sont grincheux.  
the children sick are grouchy

In (20) we have a regular generic generalization over sick children; the generic operator here binds situations that are in one-to-one relation with sick children. The variable  $x$  therefore is maximal and non-familiar and thus we expect the use of a

definite form in ‘high Maximality’ languages like French, but also other Romance languages and Hungarian. The DRS below gives the semantics for this sentence.

(21) DRS for (20)



DRS (21) differs minimally from (19): here we are talking about the properties characterizing sick children as a subset of children, while in (19) we talk about sickness situations involving children.

In our account, pseudo-genericity arises when the generic generalization is not over minimal situations containing the entities in the extension of the nominal but rather over bigger situations. We therefore correctly predict that the type of adjective and predication used is crucial in allowing a pseudo-generic construal (cf. Heyd 2003).

### 5. Anaphoric genericity

In section 4 above, we saw that the contrast between the two groups of languages we consider is neutralized in favor of indefinite forms in pseudo-generics. We briefly examine here the opposite situation, namely cases where true generic NPs are discourse old. In such cases the relevant variable will be both maximal and familiar and we predict definite forms across the board, because in such cases \*Def/[-Fam] will not be operative.

Contexts where kind reference is anaphoric are founding encyclopedia articles dealing with natural kinds. In such articles, once the kind itself is introduced, it becomes familiar and therefore we predict that English-type languages will use a definite plural to refer to it. This is indeed what we find, as exemplified in (22), taken from an article on dinosaurs. The heading is the first mention of the subspecies and is, as we expect, a bare plural. The first sentence in the paragraph starts with a definite plural because the kind is now discourse old.

(22) **Saurischian Bipeds** – *The saurischians* were the first of the two great groups to assume prominence. [...] From certain of these forms, *the saurischians* were certainly derived. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1972, p. 456)

Similar examples are (23) and (24), used in contexts that have introduced dinosaurs by means of bare plurals:

(23) The Mesozoic, the geologic scene in which *the dinosaurs* played the most important part, extended ... (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1972, p. 454)

(24) *The dinosaurs* belong to a major subdivision of reptiles termed the Archosauria, or ruling reptiles. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1972, p. 455)

In (22) – (24) we have a kind-level predicate whose subject refers, anaphorically, to a plural kind-level discourse entity introduced earlier by means of a bare plural generic.

In such contexts, we expect definite plural forms in case of individual level predicates as well, since even though the variable is indirectly bound by the generic operator, because of previous mention of dinosaurs, it counts as familiar. A relevant example is given in (25).

(25) *The coelurasaurus* [...] were slender-limbed, lightly-build [...] and obviously fast-running forms that appear to have preyed upon their smaller reptilian contemporaries. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1972, p. 475)

Because the ban against using non-familiar definites has been lifted thanks to anaphoric reference, English type languages can use definite NPs with generic reference in this context.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis presented here accounted for the divergence between English-type and Romance/Hungarian-type languages when it comes to the use of definite and indefinite forms in generic contexts by positing two universal constraints and deriving the contrasts from a difference in the ranking of these constraints. The analysis predicts that areas of cross-linguistic variation will be found just in case we have maximal non-familiar (and non-accommodatable) reference. We also predict that cross-linguistic stability is found in cases of maximal familiar or non-maximal non-familiar reference. In the former we expect stable definite forms, in the latter stable indefinite ones. The account makes the predictions listed below:

- No language will use a definite form for anaphoric/unique individual reference but an indefinite form for direct singular reference to kinds. *The cat* and *the sun* should behave alike universally, since both involve a unique atom, the difference being only its type.
- No language will use a definite plural form for pseudo-generics and an indefinite plural form for ‘real’ generics. Pseudo-generics must be indefinite because they are neither maximal nor familiar.
- No language will use a definite form for familiar and novel individual reference and an indefinite for pseudo-genericity and true generic generalizations. If familiarity is relevant for pseudo-binding and generic cases, it should be relevant for individual cases as well.

We have glossed over many important distinctions in the generic literature, which remain to be worked out from this perspective in future work. A particularly burning open issue is the discussion of the relation between familiarity and intensionality.

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