STUDIES IN ENGLISH GENERICS

by

John Michael Lawler

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Linguistics) in The University of Michigan 1973

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John Lawler
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ABSTRACT

STUDIES IN ENGLISH GENERICS

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This work comprises studies of several aspects of the phenomena frequently called "generic" in English grammar; these are similar, if not identical, to normal, non-generic constructions on the surface, but have different meanings, in that they refer either to repetition of activities (in the case of verbal generics) or to a class defined in some sense by the generic form (in the case of nominal generics). These include constructions like those underlined in (1)-(7):

(1) Bill walks to school.
(2) Harry's dog bites.
(3) John drinks beer.
(4) Mary teaches kindergarten.
(5) A madrigal is polyphonic.
(6) The madrigal is polyphonic.
(7) Madrigals are polyphonic.

While these constructions have long been recognized as special and peculiar in many ways, there has been little serious work done on them; in particular, there are no satisfactory analyses of the semantics or syntax of any of them.
The present work adds to our knowledge and understanding of generics not by developing further analyses as such, although some are advanced, but by concentrating on the syntactic and semantic properties of these forms and developing from these some necessary characteristics for any adequate analysis of English generics. This is done by studying from a generative semantic viewpoint several of the many topics which suggest themselves, and noting the interrelationships with numerous other phenomena in English grammar.

Chapter I is an introduction to the study of generics, dealing with the distinctions and ambiguities of the constructions (primarily verbal generics) and suggesting tentative analyses.

Chapter II is a study of the behavior of generics embedded as verbal complements. It shows the major differences between stative and active embedding verbs, and presents strong evidence that the proper analysis of verbal generics requires use of quantifiers of some kind. In addition, it notes many inexplicable similarities between generics and statives, as well as numerous relationships with modals.

Chapter III deals with occupational generics (like (4) above), showing how much of society's values are reflected in our use of these constructions, and suggesting analyses deriving from conversational postulates.

Chapter IV is concerned with nominal generics like those in (5)-(7) above (respectively, "indefinite", "definite", 
and "plural" generics), exploring numerous topics, such as their relationships with modals and quantifiers, their presuppositions, their uses in sentences, and their interactions with generic verbal constructions. An extremely tentative analysis is advanced for certain types of nominal generic.

Chapter V has the dual purpose of summing up the findings of the studies preceding and pointing some directions for further research uncovered (or left untouched) by the studies.

The major value of this work resides not in the analyses, which are dubious and _ad hoc_ for the most part, but rather in the plethora of facts adduced, and their implications for linguistic theory. In order to understand generics, it is demonstrated that contexts and conveyed meanings must be taken into account, as well as highly abstract entities like quantifiers. This work provides strong confirmation of recent generative semantic views of language.