1   Quirky and fickle

Most of the ink that has been spilled in an attempt to provide an adequate account of generic discourse has pooled around the distinctive way in which characterizing generics are capable of absorbing counter-instances. Some uses of generics remain true despite the existence of a large proportion of the subject class that fails to possess the predicated property, while others go false with only a few counter-instances. The source of requisite proportion seems neither to be determined by the subject or the predicate. It is perhaps not even a result of their unique combination. In a word, generics are *quirky*.

But, as many theorists have pointed out, there is also some sort of presumption of homogeneity associated with the use of plurals (von Fintel, Schwarzschild, Loebner, Cohen). von Fintel characterizes this presumption as such:

> "A speaker who chooses a sentence involving GEN rather than one of the overt quantifiers signals that it is presupposed that the cases in the domain of quantification are uniform with respect to the property attributed by the scope of the quantifier." (vonfintel1997, p. 34)

The inclination toward interpreting the subject class as homogeneous with respect to the predicate in generic contexts provides a natural basis for hearers to challenge the use of a generic for which they suspect there are counter-instances. That is to say, generics present themselves as *susceptible* to challenge.

A consequence of this observation in the context of the conversational exchange is that it is open to the initiator to retrench in the face of a challenge. In other words, generics are *resilient* to refutation.

These two inclinations suggest that, in addition to being quirky, generics are also *fickle*. The following exchange brings out both sides of fickleness:

> **EX 1.**   (Teddy bears)
>
> **A**: Bears are dangerous.
> **B**: What about Teddy bears?
> **A**: I didn't mean *all* bears.

2   Discourse dynamics

Quirkiness is a feature of sentences taken in isolation, whereas fickleness has implications for how the sentence is used in discourse. In this sense, to say that generics are fickle is to say that they are context-sensitive, broadly construed. But the proof of the pudding is the way it slides down you gullet. And fickleness has deep implications for the way that utterances in discourse interact with the context.

3   The challenge of fickleness

The fickleness of generic discourse provides an interesting obstacle to an analysis of the semantics and discourse dynamics of characterizing generics. *Susceptibility* pushes us toward a more strict representation of the content of the initiation to make sense of why it is appropriate to offer a correction to it. That is, it seems that B is disagreeing with A, and the most natural way to formalize disagreement is in terms of the presentation of conflicting content.

But *resilience* pushes in the opposite direction. A's retrenchment, in so far as it is appropriate, naturally suggests compatibility between her original claim and B's challenge, which pushes us toward a less strict interpretation of the initiation content.

Navigating between the rock of a the tendency for generics to elicit challenges and the hard place of their ability to withstand those challenges is a particularly interesting puzzle for a linguistic analysis of this type of discourse.

4   Options for dealing with fickleness

Under the assumption that the appropriateness of a conversational move tracks the truth of the content of the move, it appears that the use of generics in a situation where there are known counterinstances to the generalization are both true and false.

Dimensions of content Of course, we needn't understand susceptibility and resilience as directly contradictory. If, as von Fintel suggests, homogeneity is a presupposition of generics, we can take retrenchment in the face of a challenge as a refusal to accomodate that presupposition.

Context shift Alternatively, the tension may be resolved by a shift in the conversational context throughout the course of the exchange. A similar pair of inclinations is common in the use of epistemic modals, as shown in the following exchange, adapted from Gillies and von Fintel (vonfintel2008, p.81):

> **EX 2.**   (Keys)
>
> **A**: The keys might be in the drawer.
> **B**: (*Looks in the drawer.*) They're not. Why did you say that?
> **A**: I didn't say they *were* in the drawer. I said they *might be* there – and they might have been. Sheesh.

Might claims are sometimes retracted when presented with countervailing evidence available in a different context from the original utterance. But as Keys makes clear, *might* claims are ocassionally *resilient* in the face of such challenges. The felicity of the exchange in Teddy bears suggests that correctible initiations exhibit similar resilience.

5   Semantic negotiation

I contend that neither of the ways out suggested above is sufficient to our task. Instead, fickleness points to a deeper issue of discourse dynamics.

Fickleness is a property that generics possess in virtue of their being elements put to use in conversational exchange. The apparent tension in their instantiation of these dual properties is dissipated if we view the conversational exchange (or at least self-contained parts within it) as a process of *negotiation* over the scope of terms as much as *exchange* of information (cf. Richard).

The exchange in Teddy bears reveals an additional interesting fact about disputative discourse. Even if it is appropriate for an initiator to refuse to retract a correctible, the challenge provided byt the correction is no less appropriate. The flip-side of the resilience of correctibles is that they are also highly susceptible to challenge.