

Genericity and Aspect

The goal of this paper is to examine the role of aspectual characteristics of verbs in generic sentences in Russian and Bulgarian. It has been observed that verbs used in the perfective aspect can appear in so called non-inductive generalizations. Inductive (or descriptive) generalizations are based on inductive inference, that is, they are true due to sufficiently many relevant entities with the predicated property. Non-inductive (or nomic, normative) statements express analytic truths which are evaluated with regard to rules and laws.

This topic has been often discussed in the literature, mainly for English and French (cf. Cohen 2001, Dobrovie-Sorin 2003, Greenberg 2002, Mari 2008, among others). Russian and Bulgarian are interesting in this respect because they display the correlation between the form of the NP and the aspectual characteristics of the verb in two kinds of generics. Imperfective aspect is an appropriate option when the validity of generalizations are based on our knowledge of what is usually the case, that is, on facts, where gnomic sentences “tend to be concerned with matters of opinion, rather than fact”, which brings them within the scope of epistemic modality (Lyons 1977:681, cf. also Fielder 1993, Stambolieva 2008). When an event is conceptualized as real, it is likely to be quantified, and explicit quantification is consistent with the imperfective aspect, whereas explicit qualification is compatible with the perfective aspect.

In the present paper I will discuss whether the recent theory of Greenberg (2002) can account for the data found in Russian and Bulgarian. Greenberg postulates the distinction between different accessibility relations for bare plurals and indefinite singulars in English. While bare plural generics can express “descriptive” and “in virtue of” statements, indefinite singulars are felicitous only in non-inductive, that is “in virtue of” generalizations. Greenberg contends with her “enough”-presupposition that descriptive generalizations (e.g. *Boys don't cry*) hold in all worlds that are maximally similar to our world and are based on the conclusion which we can draw from a sufficient number of instances of individuals or events in the actual world. By way of contrast, “in virtue of” generalizations (e.g. *A boy doesn't cry*) are not supported by a sufficient number of realizations in the actual world. They are inferred in virtue of some specific property associated with the property denoted by the indefinite singular, that is, the generalization holds in virtue of this property.

I will argue that Russian generic sentences with bare plural NPs and imperfective verbs (e.g. (3)) receive two interpretations: the inductive one and the “in virtue of” reading, while singular perfective generics (cf. (4)) are interpreted as generalizations justified by some associated property (i.e. “in virtue of” statements).

(3) *Druz'ja vseгда pomagajut.*

friends always help-IMP

(4) *(Nastoljaščij) drug vseгда pomožet.*

(real) friend always helps-PF

In (3) the preferred reading is the descriptive one (although the non-inductive interpretation is not excluded) and the statement holds in the world maximal similar to our actual world. The generalization in (4) is satisfied with an associated property (i.e. in virtue of trueness and helpfulness of a friend) and is true in the “ideal” world which is restricted by some modal base (epistemic, deontic, stereotypical etc.). Such sentences like (4) are used to express laws, rules, stereotypes etc. (cf. in Russian: *Umnyj ustupit* ‘A cleverer person gives in’ or *Xorošaja xozjajka vseгда nakormit gostja* ‘A good housewife always serves food for guests.’). Another piece of evidence for the claim that singular generics can not express inductive truths is provided by the observation that absurd or weird generalizations like (5) which by nature can not be inferred from any associated property require the plurality of NPs and the imperfective aspect of verbs:

- (5) *Norvežskie studenty s familiej na 't' nosjat zelenye galstuki.*
'Norwegian students whose name begins with "t" wear green ties.

The observed correlation also displays in the nominal and aspectual domain in Bulgarian: plural NPs usually occur with quantified events, and singular forms exemplify a typical representative of a class and appear in modalized contexts. So, the imperfective aspect and definite plural NPs are the appropriate option in descriptive generalizations, whereas the perfective aspect and indefinite singular NPs with edin 'one' are preferred in "in virtue of" generics (cf. (6), (7)):

- (6) *Ženite-DEF.PL gotvjat-IMPF vseki den.*
'Women cook every day.'
 (7) *Edna žena-INDEF.SG vinagi šte nameri-FUT. PF vreme za decata si.*
'A woman always will find time for her children.'

Perfective and imperfective generics display different properties. In contrast to imperfective generics, perfective generalizations are not compatible with such markers of the habituality like *often, usually* (cf.(8)):

- (8) **(Nastojasčij) drug často / obyčno pomožet.*
(real) friend often usually helps-PF

This correlates with the difference between imperfective and perfective generics w.r.t. to tolerating of exceptions. *Often, usually* indicate the possibility of exceptions. Perfective generics don't tolerate exceptions (cf. also the use of perfective verbs in sentences like *Maslo rastaet na solnce* 'Butter will melt-PERF in the sun') due to the fact that they are based on essential (not descriptive) properties, cf. (9) and (10). They are similar to truly definitional sentences like *A wale is a mammal* or *A madrigal is polyphonic*. Perfective generics are satisfied by definitional properties which holds in modal worlds, i. e. (stereotypic) definitions of a real friend or a real man include helpfulness or toughness as essential properties.

- (9) *Druz'ja tože ne vseгда pomagajut.* (10) **(Nastojasčij) drug tože ne vseгда pomožet.*
friends also not always help-IMP (real) friend also not always helps-PF

Perfective generics has future time reference. In Russian the present perfective has the future meaning and considered in some grammars as a future tense. Bulgarian explicitly uses the future verbal form in perfective generics (cf. (7)).

I will show that different properties of perfective and imperfective generics can be captured by the assumption about different accessibility relations for a world in which the propositions expressed by perfective and imperfective generics are true.

References:

- Cohen, A.** 2001. On the generic use of indefinite singulars, *Journal of Semantics* 18, 183-209;
Dobrovie-Sorin, C. 2003. Generic indefinites and (un)selective binding. In Stark, E. & U. Wanruszka (eds.): *Syntaxtheorien. Modelle, Methoden, Motive*. Tübingen. 35-52; **Fielder, G.** 1993. *The semantics and pragmatics of verbal categories in Bulgarian*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press;
Greenberg, Y. 2002. Two types of quantificational modalized genericity and the interpretation of bare plurals and indefinite singulars NPs. In Jackson B.(ed.): *Proceedings of SALT XII*. 104-123;
Lyons, J. 1977. *Semantics*. 1 & 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; **Mari, A.** 2008. Analyticity under perspective: indefinite generics in French. In A. Grønn (ed.): *Proceedings of SuB12*. Oslo. 414-429; **Stambolieva, M.** 2008. Building up aspect. A study of aspect and related categories in Bulgarian, with parallels in English and French. In: Davis G. & K. A. Bernhardt (eds.): *Contemporary studies in descriptive linguistics*, vol. 6. Bern: Peter Lang.