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Habitual sentences and Direct Objects in Italian

Aim.
Genericity is a topic that has been much debated in the literature from the semantic viewpoint but scarcely addressed from the syntactic perspective. Seminal works such as Chierchia's (1998) and Longobardi's (1994) are noticeable exceptions along whose lines the present research takes its moves. Our aim is to address the issue of genericity at the semantic/syntactic interface and, more specifically, to determine how the habitual reading (a type of generic interpretation) and/or the particular reading of a sentence are affected by the properties of its direct object (DO). On the basis of Italian data we suggest that the relevant notions are (in)definiteness and number.

Background.
The approach that we adopt is the traditional operator based analysis (Lawler, 1972; Dahl, 1975; Carlson, 1977a,b). Kratzer (1995) proposes that the habitual reading is possible only with verbs that project a situation argument. However, while in the episodic reading this argument is bound by existential closure, in the habitual reading is bound by an alternative operator, identified in our work with the generic operator "Gen" (Krifka et al. 1995). In order to bind its variables, the operator Gen is supposed to be located in a position dominating at least the vP. Furthemore our analysis is cast in a Cartographic approach to syntactic structures; we thus assume that semantic ambiguity is necessarily mirrored by a difference at the structural level (Cinque & Rizzi 2008).

Puzzle.
The contrast between examples like (1) and (2), which respectively involve a bare plural and a plural complement introduced by a definite article, show that the properties of the DO object play a role in the overall interpretation of the sentence.

1)   Gianni mangia funghi.
        Gianni eats mushrooms.
2)   Gianni mangia i funghi.
        Gianni eats the mushrooms.

Example (1) is a sentence with an episodic predicate (i.e. dynamic transitive predicates) and it receives a habitual reading. We already mentioned the fact that habitual sentences are a kind of generic sentences and their predicate is interpreted as stative, (stativity is a property associated to genericity). In the case at hand, the stative predicate derives from its episodic/dynamic counterpart and this is the reason why a sentence like (1) is interpreted as (3) below:

3)   Gianni is someone who eats mushrooms.

When the DO is definite, as in (2), two readings are readily available: a generic reading and a particular one, namely "Gianni is eating mushrooms at the present moment".
To complicate the picture, there are cases in which the habitual reading is blocked. This happens when the DO is singular, regardless of its indefinite or definite status, as (4) and (5) respectively show.

4)   (#Generalmente) Gianni mangia un fungo.
        (#Usually) Gianni eats a mushroom.
5)   (#Generalmente) Gianni mangia il fungo.
        (#Usually) Gianni eats the mushroom.

The only possible reading of (4) and (5) is the particular one, that is, "Gianni is eating a/the

mushroom at the present time".

Analysis.
The above data show that the habitual reading is only possible with a plural object (cf. (1-2) vs. (4-5)), and that the particular reading involves an article, be it indefinite or definite (cf. (2), (4-5) vs. (1)). This suggests that the presence of a plural DO, as in (2), provides additional structural layers that allow the particular reading to emerge in addition to the habitual one.

To account for the data, we propose that both the properties of the sentence and of the complement have to be taken into account. Since (4) and (5) can only have a particular interpretation, we assume that the predicate is indeed episodic and that the situation argument is necessarily bounded only by existential closure in these and similar cases. The intuition is corroborated by the fact that in both cases the presence of a temporal adverb like "usually" causes a semantic non-sequitur. In sentences like (1), in contrast, Gen binds a variable in the DO, which has to be plural: we consider that plurality, as "sum of individuals" (de Mey, 1982), interacts with genericity and the distributive and/or cumulative properties of verbal predicates.

As for examples like (2), we suggest that they are ambiguous because the structure of their DO differs from the structure of the DO involved in (4-5): in the generic reading of (2), the article co-occurs with a variable in the structure. As this variable has to be bound by the operator, we suggest it is higher in the structure than the article. In the particular reading, the article is higher and there is no variable. A line of analysis we will pursue is that the DOs in (4-5) are specific, in contrast with the DO in (2), This difference is reflected in the structure of the complement (Ihsane 2008).

Conclusion.
In this paper, we show that the habitual vs. particular readings of Italian sentences like the ones investigated above can be understood if both the properties of the clause and the nature of their DOs are considered.

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