

Think generic! The meaning and use of generic sentences. By ARIEL COHEN. Stanford: CSLI Publications, Center for the Study of Language and Information. 1999. Pp. xiii, 208.

A revision of Cohen's 1996 dissertation, this book investigates generic statements – more popularly known as 'generalizations' – a relatively new field of inquiry. The book is organized into eight chapters: Ch. 1. 'Introduction and Overview'; Ch. 2. 'Two Views of Generics'; Ch. 3. 'Alternative-Based Generics'; Ch. 4. 'Generics as Probability Judgments'; Ch. 5. 'Determining the Alternatives'; Ch. 6. 'Generics and Frequency Adverbs'; Ch. 7. 'Reasoning with Generics'; Ch. 8. 'Conclusion'.

The sentence *Birds fly* appears to be a truism, yet most people are well aware that chickens and ostriches do NOT fly, and theoretically this should falsify the statement – yet it does not seem to. Drawing on the implications of statements such as these, C derives a number of properties of generics, namely that they (1) are unbounded, i.e. *Three birds fly* is not a generic; (2) have a lawlike flavor, and cannot be applied to temporary generalizations, e.g. if all birds wet their wings and were unable to fly; (3) require some kind of regularity when referring to temporal events, e.g. *John jogs in the park*; (4) may be false even if the majority of individuals satisfy the predicated property, e.g. *Bees are sexually sterile* is false, even though most bees are; and (5) may elicit varying truth judgments from different speakers, e.g. some people may not agree that *Birds fly* is a true statement, though there is widespread agreement that *Most birds fly* is true (3).

In the second chapter, C considers the 'rules and regulations' and 'quantification over possible individuals' approaches to determining the truth of a generic sentence. The former relies on, for example, laws of nature and genetics to ascertain the truth of a statement like *Crows are black*. But how can one infer such laws? C calls this approach 'backwards' (15). If, on the other hand, one is to resort to quantification methods and first observe many individuals before making a generalization, then what proportion is required for the statement to be true? *The platypus lays eggs* looks unproblematic, yet less than *half* of all platypuses lay eggs, namely only fertile females.

In Ch. 3, C develops an 'inductivist theory of generics' (63), in which he suggests that the individuals referred to in a generic sentence are limited to those which 'satisfy at least one of a set of alternatives', e.g. when speaking of laying eggs, one is referring only to those individuals capable of laying eggs, i.e. females. C calls this a 'relative reading', as opposed to an 'absolute reading'. He goes on to note that in English 'indefinite singulars denote predicates, whereas bare plurals and definite singulars always denote kinds.' The remaining chapters further develop and expand on these notions.

C's key conclusion is that 'generics must not be evaluated in isolation, but rather with respect to a set of alternatives under consideration.' (191) Furthermore, generics 'are systematically ambiguous between readings,' e.g. the sentence *The Frenchman eats horsemeat*. may be making a statement about a custom current among a small number of French people, or may refer to a specific individual. C claims that 'the notion of alternatives under discussion can account for both.'

This book is very dense reading. C is meticulous in his development of logical argument and detail, and no typos or format glitches were spotted. Those truly interested in acquiring in-depth knowledge of generics will be amply rewarded by a close reading of the book; others may choose to skim. [Karen Steffen Chung, *National Taiwan University*.]