The expression of genericity in Bulgarian

The goal of this paper is to examine the distribution of generic expressions in Bulgarian, a South Slavic language, in which nominal phrases can be constructed as definite singulars and plurals with a postponed article, as bare nouns, as well as indefinite phrases by use of the number word edin ‘one’. Based on the classical distinction between kind-referring expressions and characterizing sentences (Krifka et. al. 1995), I will show that definite NPs refer to kinds in Bulgarian (see (1), (2)):

(1) Mamuti –te /* Mamuti sa izmrjali. mammoths-DEF / mammoths are extinct

‘Mammoths are extinct.’

(2) Velosipedât e bil sozdaden 1850. bicycle -DEF was invented 1850.

‘The bicycle was invented in 1850.’

The use of the definite determiners is required in characterizing sentences with counts as well as mass nouns in Bulgarian (cf. (3)-(5)):

(3) Kučeto /*Kuče e umno životno. dog-DEF/ dog is intelligent animal

‘The dog is an intelligent animal.’

(4) Kučetata /*Kučeta sa umni životni. dogs-DEF/ dogs are intelligent animals

‘Dogs are intelligent animals.’

(5) Zlatoto /*Zlato e cenen metal. gold-DEF/gold is valuable metal

‘Gold is a valuable metal.’

As we can see, Bulgarian displays the same pattern of distribution of generic expressions as in Romance languages, Greek or Hungarian.

However, bare nouns, which constitute an opposition to definite nominals in Bulgarian, as well as indefinites with edin ‘one’, characterized by some restrictions in their usage in comparison with Germanic and Romance languages, can also be involved in generic quantification. In this paper I will focus on such environments in which the acceptability of generic bare and indefinite nouns can be improved. I will analyze different modal contexts, like (6) and (7), in which generics express laws and norms (cf. Cohen 2001, Dobrovie-Sorin 2003, Greenberg 2002, Mari 2008, among others).

(6) Edin mâž /mâžât /* mâž trjabva da izchranva semejstvoto si. a man / man-DEF/ man must   to   feed    family    REFL

‘A man must be able to feed his family.’

(7) Edin mâž /mâžât /mâž ne moze da postypi taka. a man / man-DEF/ man not can   to   behave  so

‘A man can't behave in this way.’

The core idea by Greenberg (2002) is 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/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. Another criterion for justification of non-inductive truths has been proposed in a recent account by Mari (2008): she points out some shortcomings of Greenberg’s theory and suggests such criterion as points of view for restricting the modal basis.

Bulgarian in particular is interesting in this respect because it displays differences between the choice of NP forms as well as the choice of aspectual characteristics of the verb (imperfective vs. perfective aspect) in generics, which supports the claim about different accessibility relations for two kinds of generalizations. It has been observed that the imperfective aspect is associated with habitual readings (i.e. real iterative, based on repetition of events) and the perfective aspect with unreal or modalized iterative, that is, gnomic and generic events (cf. Fielder 1993, Lyons 1977, Stambolieva 2008). Habitual 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). 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.

This correlation also displays in the nominal domain: plural NPs usually occur with quantified events, and singular forms exemplify a typical representative of a class and appear in modalized contexts. In this paper I will argue that in Bulgarian the imperfective aspect and plural NPs are used in descriptive generalizations (see (8)), whereas the perfective aspect and indefinite singular are preferred in “in virtue of “generics (9).

(8) Zenite gotvjat vseki den.
   ‘Women cook every day.’

(9) Edna zena vinagi nameri vreme za decata si.
   ‘A woman always finds time for her children.’

References: