ON GENERICITY AND DEFINITENESS IN MODERN STANDARD ARABIC

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The vast majority of formal analyses of the semantics of generics have been developed based on data from a small number of well-studied languages, most notably English, French, Italian, Dutch, and German. The main goal of this dissertation is to take steps towards the building of a fully formal analysis of genericity phenomenon in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), one of the least studied languages with respect to genericity, by grammatically describing and semantically analyzing manifestations of genericity in the language. Accurately accounting for the distribution of morphology within MSA generic sentences and the range of possible meanings of the sentences themselves is a crucial warrant for building reliable formal models.

This dissertation argues that similar to English and other languages, MSA characterizing sentences require semantically indefinite NP subjects. In a departure from the view of the traditional Arabic grammarians, this dissertation argues against the classification of Arabic noun phrases as definite or indefinite based entirely on the presence or absence of the definite article *ال* ‘the’, respectively. Instead, building on the work of Lyons (1999) and others, it makes use of definiteness criteria which consist of the semantic concepts of familiarity, identifiability, and uniqueness of the intended referent. Maintaining the traditional definiteness criterion leads one to the conclusion that characterizing sentences in Arabic use semantically definite NP subjects, a conclusion rejected here.

Also addressed is the status of bare NPs in MSA characterizing sentences. It is argued that bare NPs can be used in generic sentences, although only if modified directly by an adjective or a
relative clause, or indirectly when occurring in construct state, a noun form common to many Semitic languages that is found in MSA. Evidence is presented that these bare NPs are interpreted as indefinites. Verbless sentences in MSA can express habituality, a form of genericity. This dissertation proposes an account of the asymmetric distribution of copula *ya-kuun* in part on the availability of habitual readings to the sentences in which it is found. It is argued that *ya-kuun* only occurs in verbless sentences that are modified by adverbials and carry habitual meanings.