

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF THE GENERIC NOUN PHRASE

In order to complete my description of the so-called category of definiteness in Macedonian I needed an operational definition of what is called “a generic noun phrase”. I did not find such a definition in works on definiteness and on reference. Thus, I decided to try and formulate a definition based on my knowledge of the Macedonian and Polish usage. My second problem is the conditions of appearance of the definite article in generic noun phrases, hence my examples come from Macedonian, where the category of definiteness is strictly grammaticalized.

The concept of the generic noun phrase (NPgen) is based on the scope of reference of the phrase in question when used in the text. Thus, we should speak rather of the generic usage or generic interpretation of a noun phrase, than of the NPgen as such. However, with the above reservation in mind, we shall preserve here the accepted term. A NPgen differs from other NPs in that it refers to the *genus*, the *species* as such, and not to a specified selection of elements of the named *species*. Consequently, in the foreground is the intension, the connotation of the concept in question. It should be emphasized that *genus* is understood as a concept whose real and/or virtual denotates have in common some relevant inherent features, and not only accidental relational characteristics. The concepts of this type more often than not have clear cut borders and are often founded on the scientific classification of corresponding phenomena. Thus, the so-called occasional expressions (shifters, indices, proper names used in their primary function) are *a priori* excluded from an NPgen.

There exist two different theories concerning the referential characteristics of an NPgen. One of them says that an NPgen refers always and only to the connotation of the concept, to its intension. Consequently, sentences including NPgen are of metalinguistic character. The second, “naive” theory accepts the possibility of speaking about the denotation of an NPgen and, *ipso facto*, accepts the existential presupposition that it implies when used in a factive sentence. According to that second theory, insofar as the extension, the denotation of the concept is concerned, we have to distinguish three different situations:

- (a) a NP refers to the set as a whole, to all the extension of the concept; NPs used this way are *ex definitione* in plural forms;
- (b) a NP refers, seemingly, to one typical element as representing the whole set; the NP is then in the singular form;
- (c) a NP refers to a non specified selection of the elements of the set, its number form is not *a priori* defined.

(a) Here belong the prototypical, non-controversial NPgen which appear in sentences informing on definitional characteristics of the set, cf.

(1) Mac. *Мувите имаат две крила*. ‘The flies have two wings’

(2) Mac. *Петлите се птици*. ‘The roosters are birds’

(3) Mac. *На слоновите кожата им е дебела*. ‘The skin of the elephants is thick’

(4) Mac. *Именките се конститутивни членови на именските синтагми*. ‘Nouns are constitutive members of noun phrases’ etc.

The above examples could be rewritten with the determiner *сите* ‘all’ included into the NPgen (*сите муви, сите петли...* etc.). It would change nothing on the communicative plane, it would only increase the expression, and this would be unusual in sentences of the definitional type. It seems that the addition of *сите* cannot be used as a test for the generic character of the NPs under discussion.

The presence of the definite article in Macedonian NPs of the above type is due not to their generic usage, but to their function and position in the sentence. In the examples (1), (2) and (4) it is the nominative case relationship and the position at the beginning of the sentence, in the example (3) – the dative case relationship and the position at the beginning of the sentence. Changing the function and/or the position we get NPgen with optional presence of the article, cf.

(5) Mac. *Забрането е да се убиваат тигри(те)*. ‘It is forbidden to kill tigers’

or

(6) Mac. *Кожата на тигри(те) е дебела*. ‘Tigers’ skin is thick’

or

(7) Mac. *Децата во зоолошката градина радо (ги) гледаат тигри(те)*. ‘The children in zoo gladly watch tigers’

or

(8) Mac. *Секој ловец знае дека со тигри(те) нема шега*. ‘Every hunter knows that you don’t joke with tigers’

or

(9) Mac. *Оваа забрана не се однесува на тигри(те)*. ‘This ban doesn’t concern tigers’

and so on, and so on.

The doubt about the generic character of a phrase begins with sentences including occasional expressions. Cf., e.g., such sentences as:

(10) Mac. *Јас сакам деца*. ‘I like children’

or

(11) Mac. *Ана мрази седници*. ‘Ann hates meetings’

or

(12) Mac. *Историските романи се омилена лектура на Јане*. ‘Historical novels is what John likes the best’

etc.

It is clear that the scope of reference of the NPs in the above sentences is not *genus* as such, but an unspecified selection of its denotates defined by the personal experience of the protagonist. Are these NPs generic? Every solution would be arbitrary. I should say that such NPs are quasi-generic, which means not generic. They are derivatives of the assertions of the type:

(10') *Mac. Сите деца со кои имав контакт ми беа мили.* 'All the children that I have met up to now were to my liking'

or

(11') *Mac. Сите седници во кои Ана учествуваше и беа одвратни.* 'All the meetings where Ann has participated up to now were repellent to her'

or

(12') *Mac. Сите историски романи што Јане ги има прочитано му се допаднаа повеќе од другите книги.* 'The historical novels that John has read up to now were more to his liking than other books'

etc.

(b) To the second type of NPgen belong, as mentioned above, NPs that seem to refer to one typical denotate of the concept, but *de facto* refer to the *genus* as a whole. Thus, the difference between type (a) and type (b) is only of formal character. Our first, prototypical examples (1 to 4) can all be rewritten that way, cf.

(1') *Mac. Мувата има две крила.* 'The fly has two wings'

(2') *Mac. Петелот е птица,* 'The rooster is a bird'

(3') *Mac. На слонот кожата му е дебела.* 'The skin of an elephant is thick'

(4') *Mac. Именката е конститутивен член на именската синтагма.* 'A/The noun is a constitutive member of the noun phrase'

Mutatis mutandis examples from (5) to (9) can be rewritten in the same way, but this does not refer to the examples from (10) to (12), which seems to confirm their quasi-generic character.

We could also rewrite examples (1' – 4') replacing the definite article with the determiner *секој* 'every' – the message would be changed on the expressive plane only; the status of *секој* is identical with that of *сите*.

The main formal difference between our type (a) and the type (b) is in the fact that in the NPgen of the type (b) the definite article is obligatory regardless of the case relationship and of the linear order of the sentence.

The NPgen of the type (b) whose constitutive members can be interpreted both as names of a unique representative element of the set and also of the set itself, i.e. as collective nouns, present an interesting problem. Classical examples are names of some fruits and vegetables, cf.

(13) *Mac. Пиперката е (/ Пиперките се) најпопуларен зеленчук во Македонија.* 'The pepper is the most popular vegetable in Macedonia'

or

(14) *Mac. Пиперката е евтина (/ Пиперките се евтини) годинава.* 'Peppers are cheap this year'

etc.

NPgen of the type (a) and of the type (b) can appear both in factive and in non-factive sentences.

(c) NPgen of the type (c) appear exclusively in non-factive sentences. They refer to any arbitrarily selected denotate of the generic concept and/or any arbitrary selection (group) of denotates. On the formal plane they are in singular form and are usually accompanied with the indefinite article *еден* or with determiners of the series *кој било*, *кој и да е* whose nearest if not ideal equivalent is English *any*. Cf.

(15) Mac. *Која било мува може да ја пренесе болеста* ‘any fly can...’
as against:

(15’) Mac. **Која било мува ја пренесува болеста* ‘any fly...’
or

(16) Mac. *Кој било лекар мора да знае да ја изврши интервенцијата* ‘any doctor...’
as against

(16’) Mac. **Кој било лекар знае да ја изврши интервенцијата* ‘any doctor...’
Cf. also:

(17) Mac. *Еден лекар не би смеел да постапува така*. ‘Somebody/Anybody who is a doctor...’

Finally, cf. some examples with latent determiner of the *any*-series:

(18) Mac. *Интервенцијата мора да ја изврши лекар* ‘The intervention should be made by a doctor’, i.e. ‘somebody / anybody who is a doctor...’

(19) Mac. *Таквите задачи треба да им се доделуваат на студенти* ‘Such tasks should be assigned to students’...

The semantic structure of the above sentences (15-19) includes the presupposition about the existence of the *genus* in question, but there is no presupposition about the existence of any specified denotates able to fulfill the function of arguments of the virtual relations constituting these sentences.

Intensional factive predicates of the type (*си*) *замислува* ‘imagine’, *сонува за...* ‘dream about...’, *мечтае* ‘daydream’, also *бара* ‘look for...’ pose a special problem: in some contexts they imply argument NPs that are referentially ambiguous, cf.

(20) *Сонувам за една убава куќичка до морскиот брег* ‘I dream about a beautiful little house on the shore’

where, depending on the intention of the speaker, the existence of the house is or is not implied, cf. also:

(21) *Барам еден добар прирачник по шпански за Македонци* ‘I am looking for a good manual of Spanish for Macedonians’

etc.

If we accept the non-referential interpretation, the above examples could be qualified as /+ generic/. (Givon 1984: 389-390), or – if we accept that virtual concepts have no denotation – as /+ predicative/.

Bibliography

T. Givón, SYNTAX, A Functional-Typological Introduction, Volume I, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1984

Povzetek K DEFINICIJI T.I. GENERIČNE IMENSKE SINTAGME

Prispevek je poskus definicije pojma t.i. generične imenske sintagme. Avtorica ugotavlja, da bi bilo ustrežnejše kot o generični sintagmi govoriti o generični uporabi imenske sintagme.

Analiza temelji na primerih iz makedonskega knjižnega jezika v potrjevanju kategorialne karakteristike sintagem, ki so v literaturi ocenjene za generične. Misli se na kategoriji določnosti in števila, tj. na referenčno in količinsko karakteristiko.