This paper is concerned with two major things. First, it makes a pre-theoretical proposal for a theory of genericity that is grounded in Neo-Davidsonian event-based Semantics, based on the ontological nature of things that are quantified over in generic sentences (including habituals). Although the paper builds heavily on the classical assumptions of Carlson and Pelletier (1995), its major theoretical orientation is based on Parson (1990) and Landman (2000). Second, it examines how Yoruba generic sentences are constructed using the framework proposed.

According to Carlson (1989), a generic sentence is one that expresses a regularity. Ontologically, there are two things that can be regular or generic in a generic sentence. These are entities, realized in the syntax as NPs, and eventualities, realized as VPs and AdjPs. These two can occur together in the same sentence as in (1a), but they can also occur independently as seen in (1b, c and d). The most interesting of the examples in (1) is the case of (1d), which does not appear to have any entity but contains a generic event that is specified in spatiotemporal terms.

1. a. Dogs bark [(Generic dogs) (bark generically)]
   b. Dogs are friendly [(generic dogs) (are friendly)]
   c. John smokes a lot [(an individual John) (smokes generically)]
   d. It rains at night in the Arctic (the event of raining occurs generically at night in the Arctic)

The examples in (1) show that the ontology of genericity in generic sentences requires a distinction between generic individuals like dogs in (1a&b) and generic eventualities like smokes in (1c) and rains in (1d). Thus, we can distinguish between entity-driven genericity and eventuality-driven genericity. Generally, three kinds of entities or individuals are identified along the line of Carlson and Pelletier (1995:15): specific individuals e.g. John as in John smokes, kind individuals e.g. dinosaurs in Dinosaurs are extinct, and generic individuals e.g. dogs as in dogs are friendly. The paper claims that only generic individuals are quantified over by GEN, while specific and kind individuals are existentially quantified over. The paper reckons with only two types of eventualities: events and states. Two types of events are distinguished. These are concrete events such as came last night, and generic events such as came every night. Three types of states are identified. These are individual level states such as is intelligent, stage-level states as in is hungry and generic states such as is always hungry. Rather than assuming a GEN operator for the generic states and events, the paper assumes that they are existentially quantified over but include the generic predicates gen(e) and gen(s). This approach provides an elegant account for sentences such as (1d) without recourse to pragmatics as is the tradition in the GEN approach.
Looking at Yoruba from the viewpoint of this framework provides a straightforward account of how generic sentences are constructed in the language. Two basic types of NPs are important in Yoruba generic sentences. These include bare singulars and bare plurals. Bare singulars like ewúrẹ̀, ‘goat’, are taken as uniformly referring to kind. Their existential or generic reading depends on the kind of eventualites in which they are serving as argument. Generally speaking, they are interpreted existentially when they serve as argument in concrete events and stage-level states, and generically in generic events and generic states. Bare plurals which are formed with the plural marker àwọn, as in àwọn ewúrẹ̀ ‘goats’, can only be interpreted existentially and generically but not as reference to kind. Generic events and states are formed naturally with the imperfective marker máa-ń which reduces to a clitic in focus constructions. Other grammatical features that become salient in the formation of kind, specific and generic individuals and generic eventualities in Yoruba are negation and focus. Perhaps the most revealing of the Yoruba data are constructions where eventualities are put in focus. For example, there are two ways to express the English generic dogs eat bones: (a) Ajá máa-ń jẹ egungun [dog IMPV eat bone]; (b) Jíje ni ajáá jẹ egungun [eating Foc dog.IMPV eat bone]. The first states that a regular dog performs the generic event of eating bones, while the second states that the generic event of eating bones is one that a regular dog performs. This alternation affirms the ontological distinction made above between individuals and eventualities. In (a), a regular or generic individual is in focus, while in (b), a generic event is in focus.

The ontological distinction assumed between generic individuals and generic eventualities has a lot to contribute to the literature on generic sentences. First, the proposed classification of eventualities and individuals (which can be further refined) makes it easy to examine them thoroughly. Second, certain structures such as typhoons arise in this part of the pacific, which have constituted a huge challenge in the literature can be easily accounted for. One good example is the structure in (1d). Structures like (1d) have always been analyzed with recourse to pragmatics. This framework presents an analysis that does not assume more than what is present in the semantics.

References


