# snippets

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# *Might* generics

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The logical form of a generic sentence such as *Dogs bark* is usually analyzed, à la Lewis 1975, in terms of an (unpronounced) two place operator GEN and its arguments, the restrictor $dogs(x)$ and the matrix $bark(x)$: GEN $x[dogs(x)][bark(x)]$. (Our focus here is on simple characterizing generic sentences with bare plurals and stative predicates.) See Carlson and Pelletier 1995 for an overview of this standard tripartite analysis, and discussion of various complications. The semantics of GEN is more controversial. But a promising approach assigns a generic sentence the truth-conditions of a quantified modal conditional, $\forall x(dogs(x) > bark(x))$, where the modality is "normalcy" and $>$ is a variably strict conditional. See Delgrande 1987, Asher and Morreau 1995, and Pelletier and Asher 1997.

But how do generics interact with other modals? I'll offer one observation about an interaction with *might* that presents a challenge for standard theories.

Wild mushrooms are a mixed bag — some are poisonous and some are harmless. So it is not the case that if something is a wild mushroom then normally it is poisonous, but it is also not true that if something is a wild mushroom then normally it isn't poisonous. There is no generic truth here. Thus, the following are both false:

(1)  Wild mushrooms are poisonous.

(2)  Wild mushrooms aren't poisonous.

Of course, there are tricky cases with *striking property* or *existential readings* (Cohen 2004), but the standard analysis predicts that there are pairs such as (1) and (2) that — in the right context with the right disambiguation — are both false. Now consider the following "*might*-generic":

(3)  Wild mushrooms might be poisonous.

In the situation we are considering (3) is true. But does *might* have a wide-scope or narrow-scope reading with respect to GEN?

Clearly (3) can't express that the corresponding generic is epistemically possible — we know that the corresponding generic (1) is false (in the relevant context). That is, the *might* here doesn't scope over the corresponding generic.

Instead, it seems to express the *dual* of the GEN operator in a way that is reminiscent of what Lewis (1973) said about *might*-counterfactuals: "if *A* then might *B*" is equivalent to "not: if *A* then would not-*B*". But the challenge for the dual analysis is to compositionally implement the "Lewisian equivalencies" whereby (3) is equivalent to (4).

(4)  It is not the case that wild mushrooms aren't poisonous.

The challenge, then, is to provide such an account in terms of the denotation of *might* and GEN.

Note that it would not do to analyze (3) as saying that if something is a wild mushroom, then it would normally be such that it is *possible* that it is poisonous. This treatment is analogous to the contentious "would-be-possible" readings of *might*-counterfactuals (Lewis 1986: 63-4). But then duality fails. Moreover, since *might* is epistemic, (3) comes out as false given that some wild mushrooms are easy-to-identify as non-poisonous (cf. Lewis 1973: 80-1). So this, unfortunately, gets the logic wrong.

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