(In)Definiteness through Genericity

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Our views of genericity, a universal semantic concept, is largely shaped by English, the language in which genericity was first studied. Our views on (in)definiteness, also a universal concept, is also influenced by English where the study of the indefinite-definite distinction has its roots. While these concepts are universal, their expression is subject to significant cross-linguistic variation.

In this talk, genericity and (in)definiteness are considered from the perspective of languages different from English. We look at languages without articles and establish that, appearances notwithstanding, bare NPs in such languages are not bona fide indefinites. Their indefinite readings are derivative on their kind-level meanings, except in specific syntactic positions such as the direct object position. We also look at languages in which kind-terms are obligatorily or optionally definite, not only in the singular but also in the plural. We focus on the well-known fact that such NPs differ from English bare plurals in not having indefinite readings in episodic contexts. Both phenomena highlight the difference between overt exponents of genericity or (in)definiteness versus covert options that achieve the same results.

This cross-linguistic perspective is used to probe the triptych of overt/null/expletive determiners that are used in current theory to establish reference to individuals and kinds. It also probes the role of covert type shift versus lexical exponents of the same to probe presuppositions associated with such reference.