

## Generic subjects and predicates

Address : Albert Oosterhof  
Department of Dutch Linguistics  
Ghent University

Blandijnberg 2  
9000 Ghent  
Belgium

albert.oosterhof@rug.ac.be  
tel. 00 32 9 264 4076

abstract :

In Dutch there are four common ways to express that a property does not only apply to a single object or creature, but to the individual instances of a kind in general. These possibilities differ with respect to the form of the subject-NP. This NP can be a singular definite NP, a plural definite NP, a singular indefinite NP or a bare plural NP :

- |     |    |                    |                              |                          |
|-----|----|--------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) | a. | <u>De ijsbeer</u>  | leidt een zwervend bestaan.  | (Singular definite NP)   |
|     |    | The polar bear     | leads a roving life.         |                          |
|     | b. | <u>De ijsberen</u> | leiden een zwervend bestaan. | (Plural definite NP)     |
|     |    | The polar bears    | lead a roving life.          |                          |
|     | c. | <u>Een ijsbeer</u> | leidt een zwervend bestaan.  | (Singular indefinite NP) |
|     |    | A polar bear       | leads a roving life.         |                          |
|     | d. | <u>Ijsberen</u>    | leiden een zwervend bestaan. | (Plural indefinite NP)   |
|     |    | Polar bears        | lead a roving life.          |                          |

In my talk, I will draw attention to the differences between these four possibilities. In the literature about genericity in English, there have been noted at least two semantic contrasts between definite singular, bare plural and indefinite singular subject-NP of generic sentences.

In the first place singular indefinite NPs cannot be used as subjects of so-called kind predicates. These predicates denote a property which can only be ascribed to kinds. Examples are *be extinct* and *die out*.

A second phenomenon is that English singular definite NPs cannot refer to a kind that is 'too general'. It is, for example, more natural to attribute a generic predicate to *the polar bear* than it is to attribute it to *the bear* or *the mammal*.

In my talk, I will concentrate on Dutch. The intuitions about English are compared to the results of corpus research into the use of these NPs in Dutch. I will explain the findings of this corpus research in the framework of formal semantics.