

Generic Expressions in Norwegian

Generic expressions are utterances of one of two sorts: kind-referring sentences or habitual sentences (see e.g. Carlson and Pelletier 1995). The first type expresses references to kinds and groups of people or entities, whereas the second type of sentences describes habits and actions that occur regularly. Sentences such as (1) *Dogs bark* and (2) *Cats have four legs* are kind-referring sentences, considered as *classic* generic utterances – they make generalisations about kinds (Lyons 1977). Sentences such as (3) *Mary and Josh drink wine after dinner* and (4) *John smokes when he is angry* can be classified as habitual sentences as they describe habits and/or actions that occur regularly. Both of these reference types are considered generic as they make generalisations about something or someone.

Generics in Germanic languages, including Norwegian, can be expressed by the use of articles in noun phrases. Norwegian has five noun forms, namely: bare noun (*hund* – *dog*), indefinite (*en hund* – *a dog*) and definite (*hunden* – *the dog*) singular forms, indefinite (*hunder* – *dogs*) and definite (*hundene* – *the dogs*) plural forms. In Norwegian one can use any of the five noun forms when constructing a generic sentence (Faarlund et al. 1997, Borthen 2003). What is unclear though is in what particular contexts a given noun form is preferred to another ones. The purpose of this research was therefore to determine which noun phrases take a given form and in what context. In order to verify this, a survey based on Acceptability Judgement Task (AJT, see e.g. Ionin et al. 2011) was conducted among native speakers of Norwegian. The survey consisted of 30 short texts with gaps. In each of the gaps the respondents had the possibility to choose one or more noun forms they found correct and/or acceptable. Among the nouns in the survey one could find both countable and uncountable nouns, as well as the so called well-established kinds (Carlson and Pelletier 1995), typical for the Norwegian language (e.g. *ei hytte* – *a mountain cabin*).

The survey has shown main tendencies in the choice of noun forms in generic sentences, namely generally the respondents would choose bare noun (32,5%), followed by indefinite plural form (25%) and indefinite singular form (22%). The results are slightly different when countable and uncountable nouns are analysed separately. When it comes to countable nouns, the respondents would choose three noun forms in most cases: indefinite plural form (27,85%), bare noun (25,43%) and indefinite singular form (24,84%). There is even more agreement in choice of noun forms in questions with uncountable nouns where the vast majority would choose bare noun (92,77%). In some examples the definite form was also considered correct (7,07%), whereas indefinite form was chosen by the very few respondents (0,16%).

The AJT survey presented here is a part of a larger phd project and a scientific grant. The survey results will be later confronted with a corpus of generic texts in order to determine which of the noun forms are used most often in generic contexts.

References:

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