

Chapter 13

What counts as realis?

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INTRODUCTION

The definition of realis and irrealis has provided a point of debate for a large number of studies since the time of BYBEE, PERKINS & PAGLIUCA (1994), in spite of the fact that the terms had been used long before, for example, in studies of creoles (e.g. BICKERTON 1981). In such studies they were not seen as readily interchangeable with terms such as 'modal' at the time, given the preference to attribute modal terminology more generally to languages of Indo-European origin. However, recent work has seen an upsurge of interest in the use of the terms referring to realis/irrealis categories rather than modality (e.g. MAURI & SANSONE (eds.) 2012), and, it could be argued that the typologically more general terms have their advantages in that they need not refer to categories associated with an established grammaticalised stereotype such as an auxiliary verb.

The present chapter, however, is not concerned so much with terminology as definition, and in spite of the vast quantity of research output over the past half-century or more on the topic of modality, it is still very much a concern of present-day studies to attempt to expand the definition of what can and cannot be labelled 'modal' (see, e.g. collections such as ABRAHAM & LEISS, eds. 2008, 2012; FRAWLEY, ed. 2006; PATARD & BRISARD, eds. 2011, to name a few recent examples). In some such works, the definition of modality has been extended to cover non-verbal or non-clausal material, such as discourse particles (see FOONG, CHOR & WANG 2012, for Chinese, and MODICOM 2012, for German), or adjectives (see DE HAAN 2006, regarding Russian) with a modal function. However, the present paper aims to consider the

possibility of applying the definition of modality to include nouns and nominal categories (as, for example, in ZIEGELER 2012), since these are the mirror-face of verbs crosslinguistically, and it is verbs that are frequently associated with modal meanings, referring as they do to the factivity of an event. Although verbal events and nominal entities may share equivalence in the need to be referenced as real or non-real, the categorisation of nominal modality within the field of reference of noun phrases leaves open many questions, such as whether the differences in the grammatical realisation of nominal modality are always manifest crosslinguistically in the form of determiners; in particular, how to explain the fact that in some languages, such as English, plural generic NPs are understood as indefinite in reference, while in French, they are marked as definite¹. The aim of the present study is to suggest an explanation for such differences, based on a three-dimensional account of the grammaticalisation of nominal modality.

1. WHAT IS NOMINAL MODALITY?

Descriptive definitions of modality have proliferated in the literature, and space does not allow for an adequate review in the present study, though it could be argued that three positions seem to emerge as focal: (i) the definition of modality as 'speaker-commitment' to a proposition (e.g. BYBEE et al. 1994; LYONS 1995; NUYTS 2016), (ii) distinctions of possibility and necessity (e.g. VAN DER AUWERA & PLUNGAN 1998; NUYTS 2016), and (iii), indeterminacy as to the factual status of a state of affairs (NARROG 2005). What all such positions seem to have in common is the semantic presence of potentiality; hence, the following working definition of (irrealis) modality may suffice for present purposes:

- (1) Irrealis modality is represented by any type of potentiality expressible through a linguistic device. Potentiality aligns with non-factuality; i.e., non-actualisation.

The classification of nominals and nominal entities as an irrealis device is therefore readily accommodated by such a definition:

1. According to ABBOTT (2005) bare plural generic NPs in English receive a definite interpretation, but with a null determiner, but Abbott does not supply any reason for such a classification. HORN & ABBOTT (2012) provide a definition of definiteness aligned with a conventional implicature of uniqueness.

- (2) Irrealis nominal modality is the potential or non-factual existence of nominal referents, as expressed or as implicit in any linguistic device.

However, the inclusion of nouns within the category of irrealis 'grams', as shown in ZIEGELER (2012) is unaffected by the influences of manipulative modalities such as prohibition, permission, and social obligation, modalities which may have more to do with events and actions than the potentiality of existence. In terms of an ontological description of modality, modal nominals may exemplify the possibility that all irrealis modality is an attempt to refer to what is not actualised at the moment of speaking. It will be demonstrated later in the study that there is a clear distinction to be made between fact and actuality, and that the boundaries are often quite blurred. For this reason, the most obvious domain in which to investigate the domain of nominal modality is that of genericity and generic constructions, in which the existence of facts may be expressed without evidence of the accompanying actualisation of such facts.

Previous studies on the categorisation of nouns as modal have not been plentiful or definitive; the reader is referred to EVANS' (2003) discussion of a modal 'case' on nouns in Kayardild and Lardil (northern Tangkic, Queensland), and more recently, VAN DE VELDE (2012, p. 8-10), who discusses a range of crosslinguistic examples of nouns with mood affixes, most of them grammaticalisations of non-specificity in nouns. Although non-specific nouns need not always correlate with generics, generic nouns may be argued to be the archetypical non-specifics (*pace* PEASE-GORRISSEN 1980), as discussed below, and therefore prime candidates for consideration as nominal modals.

2. GENERIC NOUNS AS IRREALIS CATEGORIES

2.1. Semantic characteristics

Generic constructions are frequently discussed in the literature as expressions of generalisation (CARLSON 2006), which may or may not include gnomic truths or law-like statements, and therefore the characteristics of such constructions are necessarily determined by the nature of the noun-phrases used in them, or the combination of the nominals with a specific type of predicate. According to RADDEN (2009, p. 200), and DAHL (1995, p. 425), there are no languages with forms assigned exclusively for marking generics. That the

identification of a generic construction could be so vaguely determined was also pointed out by ALLAN (1980) in his comparison of the following statements:

- (3) a. The lion is carnivorous.
- b. The lion is hungry.

(3a) is a generic construction, but (3b) is not, despite the fact that the two statements share the same syntax, indicating that generic constructions are usually determined by their semantics rather than by any morphosyntactic features, at least in English. KRIFKA et al. (1995, p. 3-4) distinguish between characterising generic constructions, such as

- (4) A potato contains vitamin C, amino acids, protein and thiamine

using the indefinite article, and

- (5) The potato was first cultivated in South America

using the definite article. Examples such as (4) allow for exceptions, while examples such as (5) are universally quantifying and refer to kinds; hence not allowing for exceptions. It could be argued, then, that the use of an indefinite article vs. a definite article has some significance for the interpretation of a generic noun as either characterising or kind-referring; the distinctions in the use of determiners will be discussed further below. In all instances (3-5), though, the subject referent is non-specific as well as generic.

KRIFKA et al. (1995, p. 61) claim that generics are modal because they make assertions about open-ended sets of (nominal) entities, and they provide the example, *A lion has a mane*. However, the open-endedness of generic sets of entities is not entirely clear, as we shall see below for the case of French. It was stated in ZIEGELER (2012) that generic constructions are susceptible to modalisation because although they express truths and facts, they refer to events and situations that have no spatio-temporal anchorage, i.e., they refer to fact but not actualisation. It was therefore considered that generics are linked to modality by the sharing of a domain of indefiniteness, of either the subject nominal or its predicate. Indefiniteness is a common semantic feature shared by generics and modal statements, since modal statements, lacking reference to actualised events, are also undefined in terms of time reference. Thus, the event referred to in, for example, *This*

machine crushes oranges refers to the indefinite quantification of events of orange-crushing, while the subject in (4) refers to the indefinite quantification of the generic subject referent, indefiniteness being the textual and discourse counterpart of the semantic domain of non-specificity, or non-identification of the referent². What is important to question though, in the light of the present study, is whether definiteness in generics is as capable of generating modal nuances as indefiniteness.

2.2. Bare plural generics

While it may be said that there is no crosslinguistic evidence for the formal grammaticalisation of generics, at the same time, it is frequently noted that there are constraints on the type of determiner used to mark the nominal subjects of certain generic predicates. COHEN (1999, p. 40), amongst others, discussed the incongruity of indefinite singular generics when co-occurring with predicates referring to a kind, or genus, for example:

- (6) a. The dinosaur is extinct.
- b. Dinosaurs are extinct.
- c. *A dinosaur is extinct.

His explanation was attributed to JESPERSEN (1927), who claimed that the reason for the unacceptability in examples like (6c) was due to the fact that indefinite singulars refer only to a typical representative of a kind, not to the entire kind itself. (6c), then, refers to a failed representative generalisation. RADDEN (2009) indicates that the bare plural may serve for both the kind-referring function as well as the characterising function of generics, following FARKAS & DE SWART (2007), who make a difference between atomic, singular kind generics (e.g. 6a) and constructed, plural kind generics (6b). The difference between constructed, plural kind generics such as (6b) and characterising bare plurals such as *Dodos eat peanuts*, according to RADDEN (2009, p. 207), depends on whether the proportion mentally summed up in the bare plural generic is inclusive as in (6b) or exclusive, as in *Dodos eat peanuts*. The proportion represented in exclusive types in most cases is said to represent the salient mass of the

2. Indefiniteness is further grammaticalised than specificity distinctions in nouns, as is observable in the fact that the indefinite article extends its use to non-specific referents (see, e.g. HEINE 1997). See HORN & ABBOTT (2012) for a comprehensive account of the semantics of (in)definite reference.

type, an INSTANCE FOR TYPE metonymy. The same metonymy is in operation for representative generics, the only difference being that instead of an arbitrary instance representing the type, in exclusive bare plurals it is a salient proportion of the type's reference mass (sub-type) that represents the type - the size of the proportion is insignificant as long as the proportion is sufficient to make generalisations about the type (2009, p. 211). (COHEN 2005 also discusses existential bare plurals as *relevant* subtypes in that they refer to instances which possess a form of 'suitability' criterion - e.g. *Tractors have wheels*, where the statement refers to stereotypical, four-wheeled tractors.).

Bare generic plurals, then, the plural counterparts of indefinite singulars, do allow for exceptions when they are not kind-referring. This is illustrated by examples such as

(7) Mosquitoes carry malaria

the saliency of the proportion deriving from the fact that we are more concerned with the ones that actually do carry malaria than how many this proportion represents (RADDEEN 2009, p. 212), allowing for the fact that a small subset achieves salience. Radden goes on to explain that exclusive examples like (7) represent another form of metonymy, ACTUAL FOR POTENTIAL or GENERIC FOR POTENTIAL, illustrating clearly the modal meanings associated with such generics. It is with these distinctions in mind that comparisons with languages such as French can now be reviewed.

3. GENERICS AND NON-SPECIFIC NOUNS IN FRENCH

Insofar as generics are concerned, French distinguishes them from non-generic, non-specifics in the following ways: (i) like English, the indefinite singular acts as a representative generic, e.g. (KLEIBER 1989, p. 74):

(8) *Un* castor construit *des* barrages
'A beaver builds dams'³

in which the indefinite singular determiner, *un*, co-occurs with the indefinite partitive determiner, *des*, which is possible in the case of object count nouns of indeterminate quantification (non-specific),

3. The author's (DZ) translations apply to Kleiber's and Galmiche's examples.

though it cannot co-occur with kind generics, as illustrated by GALMICHE (1986, p. 51):

- (9) *Des chats sont des mammifères.
'Cats are mammals'.

It should be noted in particular that (9) and similar examples would be better expressed in French using the plural definite article, as shown by GALMICHE (1985, p. 12):

- (10) **Les** baleines sont des mammifères.
'Whales are mammals'.

Note that in (10) as well as in (9), the predicate nominal is pre-determined by *des*, indicating an obvious preference for a partitive article expressing indefiniteness where the need to refer to a sub-group is present. The expression of generics in French is thus similar to the tripartite system of marking generic nouns in English, but for this single feature in which the plural definite article is used where a bare plural occurs in English and in German. CARLIER (1997) illustrates these distinctions with the following examples:

- (11) a. **Un/le** diplomate est polyglotte.
'A/the diplomat is a polyglot'.
b. **Les** diplomates sont polyglottes.
'Diplomats are polyglots'.

CARLIER's interpretations of the use of both the singular and plural definite article in French generics refer to the description of the category within its group, in which a predication is assigned to the entire category as a given fact and a universal characterisation, without necessarily referring to each of its members (1997, p. 6). She claims there is a representation of the predication as virtual, in that it applies to hypothetical members as well as to actual members of the future. In this way, she follows KLEIBER (1989) in initially attempting to find parallels between the meaning of the definite singular generic determiner and the definite plural generic determiner. But there are clear distinctions, as both these authors conclude, e.g. (KLEIBER 1989, p. 108):

- (12) a. **Les** chats gris sont amusants.
'Grey cats are amusing'.

- b. ? **Le** chat gris est amusant.
 ? 'The grey cat [generic] is amusing'.

While (12a) can lend itself to a generic interpretation in both English as well as in French, (12b) would sound strange if given a generic interpretation since, as noted by RADDEN (2009), only superordinates can be found in definite singular generic nouns. On the other hand, there are cases in which the plural generic is incompatible with its predication, as seen below in (13). CARLIER (1997, p. 15) explains the reason for such disparities as being due to the fact that *le* eliminates exceptions, whereas *les* authorises exceptions. (This would also attest to the possibility that generic *les* is not the functional equivalent in plural form of generic *le*.) The same distinctions exist in the English equivalents, e.g. (CARLIER 1997, p. 15):

- (13) a. **Le** triangle équilatéral a des angles de 60 degrés.
 'The equilateral triangle has angles of 60 degrees'.
 b. ? **Les** triangles équilatéraux ont des angles de 60 degrés.
 ? 'Equilateral triangles have angles of 60 degrees'.

The plural (non-kind-referring) generic is thus of a particular kind, one that generalises over the most normal cases, though it need not apply necessarily to every instance. Thus, (12a) is felicitous due to there being exceptional cases of unamusing grey cats, while (13b) is infelicitous due to the fact that there should not be exceptions to this geometric rule, and the plural generic licences such exceptions (however, as we have seen in (10), this is only an option of their use). The fact that the differences are carried across in the English translations raises a number of questions, but at the same time, it is clear that the means of expressing plural generics does not alter the common semantic justification for their function across languages.

4. EXPLAINING THE OPPOSITIONS

The definite article might seem unsuitable for its role in marking plural generics since it is not generally considered to be a marker of open-class nominals, and, having grammaticalised from a demonstrative determiner in French (the Latin *ille*) and in many other languages (see, e.g. HEINE 1992, CARLIER & DE MULDER 2007, 2010), it could be argued, initially, that the use of the definite article to refer to an open class of items is an extension far beyond its prototypical uses which are generally confined to determining nouns that are identifiable and unique (see DE MULDER & CARLIER 2011). However, the use of the definite article for generic reference is an instance of a

'weak' function, according to DE MULDER & CARLIER (2011, p. 529), and is not restricted to French alone, e.g.:

(14) *Fehring* (North Frisian dialect)

A kaater klesi.

Cats scratch.

where the weak definite article form in *Fehring*, *a*, is used in the same way as *les* for generic nouns in French. FARKAS & DE SWART (2007) also note the fact that while English and Dutch use indefinite for plural generics, Hungarian, Greek, and all the Romance languages use definiteness, explaining this with reference to Optimality Theory. They do note, however, that in Italian and French, the constraint on the use of the definite article is dropped in the case of what they label 'pseudo-generics', generics containing event-based modifiers or modal auxiliaries. For example (2007, p. 1672):

(15) **Des** enfants malades sont grincheux.

Indef-Pl children sick are grouchy.

Such situations do not extend to the entire set of children, thus receiving an existential interpretation, according to FARKAS & DE SWART.

DE MULDER & CARLIER (2011, p. 534) attribute the spread of definite articles to generic functions across languages as an example of the early widening of the domain of identification of their referents, something which takes place as early as the 12thc in French. In CARLIER & DE MULDER (2010) they discuss the same possibility, attributing to HILMELMAN (1997, 2001) the claims that the originally narrow scope of the domain of demonstrative identification (between speaker and hearer, presumably) could be expanded to include referents that were known to be stereotypical, or whose identification was known or shared by the speech community as a whole. However, if that is the case, identification becomes less important as a function for the definite article (why mark something as identifiable when the identification is presupposed by the interlocuteurs anyway?), so there must be another functional reason that definite articles appear in plural generic constructions. The same redundant means of identification can be seen in English in uniquely-referring NPs such as *the Pope*, *the sun* etc., thus, the function of the definite article is certainly extending way beyond its original scope of marking identification, either at the discourse or deictic levels.

It may be suggested, therefore, that the advanced levels of grammaticalisation reached by the definite article result in a semantic weakening of the original meanings of identification and uniqueness associated with the source forms of demonstrative pronouns, and that the definite article in plural generics now expresses a kind of false identification over its referents. Furthermore, it may be preferable to regard genericity as a multi-faceted category, i.e., a category that embraces both definiteness and indefiniteness, a heterogeneous combination of sense oppositions, covering a range of grammatical functions crosslinguistically. It is seen to be aligned with factuality as well as non-factuality (realis or irrealis – see CRISTOFARO 2004, GIVON 1994), perfectivity and imperfectivity (see DAHL 1995; COMRIE 1985), and, as a result, hovers on the border of being either a modal or an aspectual category (see ZIEGELER 2006). Genericity could also be said to involve entities that are assigned to either a universal or an existential distributional reference. It would not be difficult, then, to argue that genericity is a grammatically polysemous category in most languages.

Given a polysemous approach to genericity, it is justifiable to argue, then, that the use of definite or indefinite articles to refer to generic entities can have more to do with the grammaticalisation of genericity than the grammaticalisation of definite articles. While it may simultaneously be proposed that both grammaticalisation processes are taking place in tandem, it would not be unlikely to find that certain categories mutually 'attract' members of other categories at certain stages of their development. Therefore, in the competition between indefinite and definite reference in generics, in some languages, it is the competing sense of indefiniteness, marking the unboundedness of the quantification of the referent, that acquires more prominence (as in English), creating bare plurals that grammaticalise only the modality of countability. Thus, what is salient in English generics is the indefiniteness of number, in other words, indefiniteness acts as an existential determiner on the NP, null or otherwise, as in FARKAS & DE SWART's (2007) 'pseudo-generics' (15), which are translated with indefinite bare plurals in English, just like kind-referring generics. In French, however, the definiteness of a kind-referring or inclusive generic NP is partly the result of the bleaching of the domain of identification in the definite article, as suggested by DE MULDER & CARLIER (2011), which, as it weakens, picks up the needs of the generic plural to refer to an entire class, containing either known or unknown referents. In effect, it acts as a universal determiner on NP reference. As an exclusive generic determiner, though, as in (12a), all that remains of

the former domain of identification is simply the *salience* of a representative group.

5. THE INGREDIENTS OF NOMINAL MODALITY IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH

In the above section, it is made clear that genericity is a category which may be expressed across different languages using different, even semantically contradictory strategies; it now remains to explain what was previously discussed in ZIEGLER (2012), as an effect of multiple grammaticalisation paths co-occurring in the same formal selection of grammatical features, i.e., the grammaticalisation of nominal modality in terms of a covert category, emerging out of the simultaneous grammaticalisation of countability, (non)identifiability and reference over an unidentified nominal referent, as in Figure 1 below:

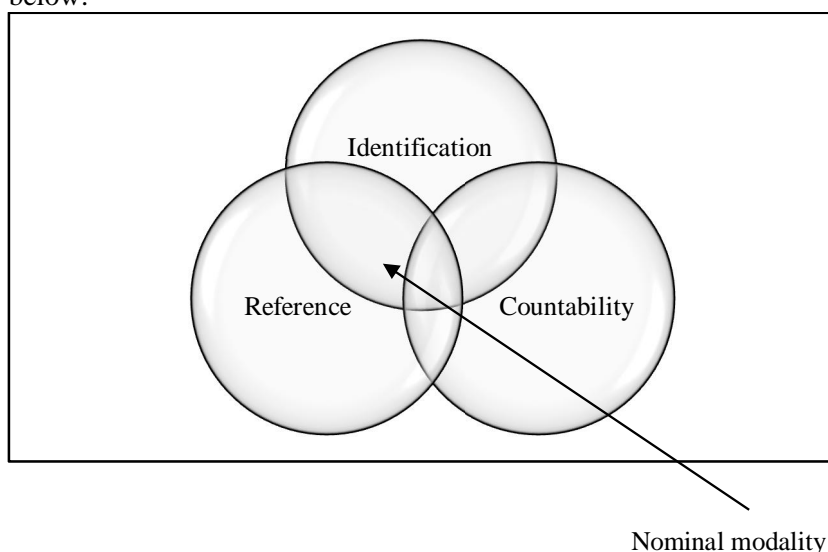


Fig. 1. Grammaticalisation of nominal modality (in English) as a by-product of the generalisation of countability distinctions to refer to unidentified referents in the discourse (from ZIEGLER 2012).

In the emergence of nominal modality out of the interdependent domains of reference, identifiability (of referents) and countability, identifiability was a discriminating characteristic to determine specific from non-specific and generic nominals. In some dialects of English (e.g. Colloquial Singapore English), non-specific nouns were observed as unmarked for number because of the uncertainty of their

quantification (see ZIEGELER 2010). Countability was therefore seen as manifesting a modal category in standard English, marked obligatorily by allomorphs such as the indefinite article and plural *-s* on count nouns whether or not such nouns had any reality status. Because of this, it is hypothesised that the potentiality of nominal modality derives from the potential for iteration in reference.

French shares the same coalescing domains of co-grammaticalisation as standard English, with generic and non-specific nouns in French both clearly marked for countability. The modality of false quantification is thus articulated in the use of the indefinite singular article on generics and non-specifics, e.g. as in (16) repeated from (11b) above:

(16) Un diplomate est polyglotte

and in the plural, non-specific determiners, *des* and *les*:

(17) **Les** castors construisent **des** barrages ('Beavers build dams')

where quantification is modally uncertain, for both subject and object non-specifics. However, for the intersecting domain of identification, there is a different problem as we have seen for generic plurals: are French plural generics, marked as definite with the determiner *les*, as 'modal' as in their English translations? In French, the expansion of the unitary numeral to determine virtual NPs as well as actual ones, as in English, provides a form of modal quantification. Furthermore, the expansion of the definite article to determine generics, with the semantic element of identifiability still persisting, is co-grammaticalised diachronically much earlier than the indefinite article according to CARLIER (2007, p. 8). However, this is also a form of falsity – false identification (since we do not always know the identity of generic referents). What distinguishes French nominal modality from English nominal modality is the need to express either the universal distribution of the generic referent, using definite reference, rather than its existential distribution, using indefinite reference or the bare plural noun form. Plural definiteness in English is nearly always distributed over the individuals in a set, so that a translation of (17) above, as 'The beavers build dams' would most often refer to a particular set of beavers, each member being identifiable, while in French, it is not a requirement that definiteness be distributive; it can be used to refer to the set as a whole without reference to the identification of each member of the set, hence its generic function.

Thus the potential for modal interpretation of such nominals runs along two lines of development in French: false identification and false quantification, the potentiality of existence correlated also with the potentiality of identity reference, and one in English, false quantification, the potentiality of existence being correlated only with the potentiality of number reference. These three dimensions, identification, reference and countability therefore combine to create the abstract category of nominal modality in different ways across different languages.

CONCLUSIONS

In the comparisons outlined above, the present study has examined the morphosyntactic representation of nominal modality across three languages, and attempted to explain the common semantic reasons that both definite and indefinite articles are found associated with nominal modality structures in different languages. In French generics the tendency to express plurals using the definite article may be attributed to the need to refer to the universal distribution of a kind-denoting generic; in English (and in Dutch according to FARKAS & DE SWART 2007), the tendency is to select a means of expressing the existential distribution of the referent set. Thus, the derivation of nominal modality in French is dependent on not only the countability criterion of unknown numbers of referents, as for English, but also the criterion of identifiability of the unknown referents to which a generic class belongs, in this way suggesting that modality and identifiability are equally aligned as modality and quantification. The findings of the present study, in this way, leave open a number of questions for future research, such as the relation between identification and indefiniteness as a modal sense, and the need to investigate the semantics of mass nouns as a possible modal dimension as well. Although it is apparent in the evidence of at least two languages, that what is countable is categorisable as *realis*, the field is open to a great deal of further study on the nature of *irrealis* modality in terms of categories outside the verb phrase.

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