Restrictions on the Generic Interpretation of Dedicated Impersonal Pronouns

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1. Introduction

Dedicated impersonal pronouns, like English *one* and German *man*, are predominantly (or exclusively) used to make general statements about humans (≈ 'people [of a certain group] in general'; see, e.g., Cabredo Hofherr 2015, Siewierska 2011). In this *generic use*, dedicated impersonal pronouns are therefore necessarily part of generic sentences (e.g., Krifka et al. 1995, Mari et al. 2013).[1]

For English *one* and German *man*, we observe that sentences like (1a), in which *one*/*man* takes part in simple non-modal predication[2] with neutral sentence stress (e.g., as a response to "Tell me something!"), are judged to be unacceptable even though the intended generic interpretation is, in principle, expressible (i.e., 'people [of a certain group] in general eat carrots').[3] This observation is puzzling since corresponding generic sentences with full DPs in subject position, like (1b), are fully acceptable.[4]

(1) a. # **Man** isst Karotten.
MAN eats carrots
'**One** eats carrots.'

b. **Menschen** essen Karotten.
humans eat carrots
'**Humans** eat carrots.'

Given our current understanding of how the generic interpretation of dedicated impersonal pronouns arises, it is unclear what makes (1a) less acceptable than (1b). I argue that the contrast in (1) can be captured if we assume, following Boneh & Doron (2013) and Rimell (2004) among others, that the generic operator *Gen*, which is a central ingredient in the interpretation of generically used *one*/*man*, has to be licensed by overt linguistic material that provides content for the restrictor of *Gen*. While dedicated impersonal pronouns do not provide such content, full DPs that occur as subjects of generic sentences do so via their nominal expression.

In connection with the generic use of *one*/*man*, we also observe variation regarding potential forms of indefinite DPs in object position. If a generic sentence with *one*/*man* is judged as unacceptable due to *Gen* being unlicensed, as in (1a), this unacceptability is independent of the form of the object DP: the sentence is unacceptable with a bare plural object or an indefinite singular DP, see (2a). However, if *Gen*

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[1] While English *one* only has a *generic use*, French *on*, German and Swedish *man*, and a number of other dedicated impersonal pronouns also have an *existential use*, in which they contribute a similar meaning to that of existential indefinite pronouns (e.g., Fenger 2018, Zobel 2017, 2020). Some dedicated impersonal pronouns—notably French *on*—even have an additional non-impersonal *referential use* (e.g., Cabredo Hofherr 2015). The present findings—if they apply to the generic use of such a pronoun in a given language, see Fn. 3—are not intended to extend to any other use of that pronoun.

[2] That is, the clause contains no modal expressions, conditional structures, or adverbs of quantification.

[3] An anonymous reviewer informs me that the Italian *si*-impersonal (see, e.g., Chierchia 1995) is acceptable in the equivalent of (1a), but patterns with English and German with respect to the distribution of bare plural and indefinite singular objects. Further work is needed to investigate this potential contrast and its implications.

[4] Adding intensional expressions to sentences like (1a) make them fully acceptable: *#'One eats carrots.'* vs. '*One has to eat carrots.*' This effect of adding overt modals will be briefly addressed in Section 4.

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is licensed by overt linguistic material, like an adverbial, the form of the object DP may have an effect on the acceptability of the sentence depending on the type of adverbial, compare (2b) and (2c).

(2) a. **Man** isst {# Karotten / # eine Karotte}.
MAN eats carrots a carrot
'**One** eats {# carrots / # a carrot}.'

b. In Norwegen isst **man** {Karotten / # eine Karotte}.
in Norway eats MAN carrots a carrot
'<u>In Norway</u>, **one** eats {carrots / # a carrot}.' (local adverbial)

c. **Man** isst {Karotten / eine Karotte} zum Frühstück.
MAN eats carrots a carrot to.the breakfast
'**One** eats {carrots / a carrot} <u>for breakfast</u>.' (iterative adverbial)

I show that the contrast in (2b)/(2c) mirrors a contrast found with generic/habitual sentences with proper names in subject position, which Boneh & Doron (2013) and Rimell (2004) take as evidence that two types of habitual sentences need to be distinguished. The data in (2), thus, provides further support for the necessity of this distinction.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I first provide some background on the semantic analysis of generically used dedicated impersonal pronouns before turning to the contrast in (1). I discuss an extant attempt by Moltmann (2006, 2010) to account for the contrast and then provide my own account based on the idea that the presence of *Gen* needs to be motivated by overt material. In Section 3, I argue that the contrast in (2b)/(2c) has a different source than the one in (1) and relate it to the distinction between *quantificational* and *non-quantificational habitual sentences*. Section 4 briefly returns to the question of what can license the presence of *Gen* in connection with dedicated impersonal pronouns. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Accounting for the contrast in (1)

2.1. Background: the generic use of dedicated impersonal pronouns

The current consensus in the literature regarding the generic use of dedicated impersonal pronouns is that the pronoun contributes an individual variable *x*, which is bound by the covert generic operator *Gen* at the sentence level. Since dedicated impersonal pronouns may also have other, non-generic uses (see Fn. 1), it is generally assumed that *Gen* is not introduced by the pronoun itself (e.g., Chierchia 1995, Condoravdi 1989, D'Alessandro & Alexiadou 2002, Malamud 2012, 2013, Moltmann 2006, 2010, 2012, Zobel 2014, 2017). The sketched formalization in (3b) captures this proposal for *man*/*one* in (3a).

(3) a. **Man** arbeitet sonntags nicht.
MAN works on.Sundays not
'**One** doesn't work on Sundays.' (≈ People in general do not work on Sundays.)

b. Gen *x* [*x* doesn't work on Sundays]

The overall proposal captures the intuition that the generic use leads to statements about "people in general" since *Gen* binding *x* induces quasi-universal quantification over individuals allowing for exceptions (see, e.g., Krifka et al. 1995, Mari et al. 2013). The proposal, however, offers no insight on the contrast observed in (1). In the literature on genericity, *Gen* is defined as a binary intensional quantifier related to adverbs of quantification like *usually* that acts as an unselective binder, see (4) (e.g., Krifka et al. 1995, Mari et al. 2013).

(4) *Gen* α [...α ...] [...α ...] (where α may be of type *e* or *s*; see Krifka et al. 1995)

The sketch in (3b) suggests that the overt material in a generic sentence with *one*/*man* may contribute exclusively to the scope of *Gen* indicated by the single squared brackets in (3b). Taking into consideration the

parallel assumed to hold between *Gen* and adverbs of quantification, this is expected since the restrictors of adverbs of quantification can be filled purely contextually, see (5) (e.g., Hinterwimmer 2020).

(5) Mia isst normalerweise Karotten.
Mia eats usually carrots
'Mia usually eats carrots.'

Out of the blue, the sentence in (5) intuitively conveys that for most situations of some contextually specified type, it is the case that Mia eats carrots. That is, the denotations contributed by the overt linguistic material are interpreted in the scope of *usually* while the restrictor is inferred.

However, if formalizations such as (3b) were admissible, and if *Gen* could be understood to be purely contextually restricted, we would expect both sentences in (1) to be acceptable since both can be given equally admissible formalizations, see (6). That is, we would expect the only difference between the two sentences in (1) to be that the bare plural *Menschen* 'humans' in (1b) contributes the property of being human to the restrictor of *Gen* restricting the domain of x, while *one*/*man* in (1a) only contributes x.[5]

(6) a. Gen x [x eats carrots] (1a)

b. Gen x [x is human] [x eats carrots] (1b)

In short, we would not expect any contrast in acceptability for the sentences in (1), contrary to fact.

2.2. Moltmann (2006, 2010): attributing the contrast to the semantics of 'one'

Moltmann (2006, 2010) already observes that certain sentences with generically used *one* are unacceptable even though corresponding generic sentences formed with non-pronominal DPs, like *the typical person* or *people*, are fine, see (7).

(7) a. # **One** has parents. (vs. **The typical person** has parents.)

b. # **One** breathes. (vs. **The typical person** breathes.)

The sentences in (7) share the same properties as the unacceptable sentences in (1a)/(2a): *one* takes part in simple non-modal predication, and neither sentence contains overt modal expressions, conditional structures, or adverbs of quantification. So, with respect to these properties, the sentences in (1a)/(2a) and (7) are of the same sort and their unacceptability should ideally be accounted for in the same way.

Moltmann's central claim regarding the semantics of English *one* is that it contributes *first-person-oriented content* (i.e., speaker / judge / perspective-sensitive content) in the sense that a speaker who uses *one* expresses a generalization on the basis of their actual or simulated personal experience. Based on this proposal, Moltmann attributes the oddness of the sentences in (7) to an incompatibility of the verbal predicates with *one*: the predicates cannot be used to express experience-based generalizations.

The main problem for Moltmann's proposal is that the clauses in (7) do not lead to unacceptability if they are part of complex sentences, as illustrated by the attested example in (8) (see also Zobel 2014).

(8) Whether one has parents, one parent or no parent at all, we are all equal.[6]

And as shown in Section 2.3, the sentences in (7) become completely acceptable as soon as a locative adverbial or some other type of adjunct is added. So, if—as Moltmann suggests—the unacceptability of the sentences in (7) is due to the semantics of *one*, it is unclear to me why adding an adverbial should have such a strong impact on whether a predicate is compatible with experience-based generalizations.[7]

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[5] Dedicated impersonal pronouns are known to be restricted to quantifying over human individuals. So, one might even propose that the denotations of (1a) and (1b) should *both* be formalized as (6b).

[6] `https://www.wya.net/press-release/one-big-family-we-are-all-equal-and-all-fall-under-the-wya-family/` (last access: April 5, 2021)

[7] Moltmann (2006, 2010) notes this as well and, as a result, abandons the question which predicates are (in)compatible with generic *one*. However, her analysis still suggests that any oddness that is observed must be due to the semantics of *one* and in violation of the first-person-orientation she ascribes to it.

2.3. Proposal: attributing the contrast to the licensing requirements of Gen

I propose that sentences like (1a)/(2a) and (7) are unacceptable because the linguistic material in these sentences fails to signal the tripartite quantificational structure that is needed to motivate the presence of *Gen*. That is, following Boneh & Doron (2013) and Rimell (2004), I assume that the presence of *Gen* must be motivated by overt linguistic material that provides content that is interpreted as part of the restrictor of *Gen*. This, of course, means that *Gen* behaves differently from adverbs of quantification with respect to its restrictor as stipulated in Section 2.1, and that the sketched formalization of the acceptable sentence in (3) cannot be correct.

Boneh & Doron (2013: 179) argue for the assumption that the presence of *Gen* has to be motivated, based on acceptability contrasts between habitual sentences with and without iterative adverbials, see (9).

(9) a. Mary smokes a cigarette after dinner.
b. # Mary smokes a cigarette.

Given that the sentences in (9) differ only in the presence of the iterative adverbial *after dinner*, the observed contrast in acceptability must be due to this adverbial. They argue that the adverbial in (9a) licenses *Gen* by providing content that signals quantification over dinner-events. In contrast, (9b) does not contain any material that could serve as the restrictor of *Gen* in a similar manner.[8]

So, the core of my proposal for what lies behind the unacceptability of sentences like (1a)/(2a) and (7) is that these sentences do not provide a potential restrictor for *Gen*. The dedicated impersonal pronouns *one* and *man* only contribute an individual variable *x* but—unlike bare plurals (and other full DPs)—do not provide any descriptive nominal material that would be interpreted in the restrictor of *Gen*.[9] As a result, *Gen* is not sufficiently motivated, which means that *one*/*man* lacks its necessary operator, and sentences like (1a)/(2a) and (7) are judged as unacceptable.

This proposal is supported by the observation that the sentences in (1a)/(2a) and (7) become completely acceptable as out-of-the-blue utterances as soon as additional material is added that is intuitively interpreted as specifying which set of individuals is quantified over (e.g., a frame PP, an *as*-phrase, or any free adjunct; see Fabricius-Hansen & Haug 2012, Stump 1985, Zobel 2018). That is, the locative PP in (10) and the predicative *as*-phrase in (11) motivate *Gen* and provide content that is interpreted in its restrictor.

(10) a. In Norwegen isst **man** Karotten.
in Norway eats MAN carrots
'In Norway, **one** eats carrots.'
b. Gen *x* [*x* is in Norway] [*x* eats carrots]

(11) a. Als Mensch hat **man** Eltern.
as human has MAN parents
'As a human, **one** has parents.'
b. Gen *x* [*x* is human] [*x* has parents]

The contrasts (1a)/(2a) vs. (10) and (7a) vs. (11), thus, parallel the contrast observed for habituals in (9).

In sum, sentences containing generically used *one*/*man* must provide explicit lexical material which is understood to specify/restrict the domain of individuals over which *Gen* quantifies in order for the presence of *Gen* to be sufficiently motivated. That is, the presence of *one*/*man* is not sufficient to license *Gen* since dedicated impersonal pronouns do not provide any descriptive content.

3. Accounting for the contrasts in (2)

3.1. Licensing of Gen does not account for everything

The assumption that *Gen* needs to be licensed via the presence of linguistic material that provides content for its restrictor accounts for one third of (2). Regardless of whether the DP in object position is a bare plural or an indefinite singular, (2a) is unacceptable since the presence of *Gen*, which is necessary

[8] This short sketch of Boneh & Doron's proposal will be made more explicit in Section 3.

[9] As noted in Fn. 5, dedicated impersonal pronouns are restricted to generalizations about humans (and anthropomorphized individuals). Given the lack of explicit nominal material, this restriction is usually ascribed to a presuppositional morphosyntactic [+human] feature (cf. Malamud 2013).

for the interpretation of generically used *one/man*, is not motivated. The licensing of *Gen*, however, does not account for the pattern in (2b) and (2c).

(2) b. In Norwegen isst **man** {#eine Karotte / Karotten}.
in Norway eats MAN a carrot carrots
'In Norway, **one** eats {#a carrot / carrots}.'

c. **Man** isst {eine Karotte / Karotten} zum Frühstück.
MAN eats a carrot carrots to.the breakfast
'**One** eats {a carrot / carrots} for breakfast.'

In both sentences, the presence of *Gen* is motivated—via a locative PP in (2b) and an iterative adverbial in (2c). So, why is (2b) with an indefinite singular object unacceptable?

3.2. Two types of habitual sentences

In the more recent literature on the semantics of habitual sentences, two types of habitual sentences are distinguished based on the quantificational structure underlying their interpretation (e.g., Boneh & Doron 2013, Rimell 2004, a.o.): *non-quantificational habitual sentences* and *quantificational habitual sentences*.

Both types of habitual sentences describe non-episodic situations, but they differ with respect to the semantic operator that induces the non-episodic meaning. Quantificational habitual sentences are the result of *Gen* being used to quasi-universally quantify over situations/events. In contrast, non-quantificational habitual sentences involve the (aspectual) habitual operator *Hab*, which has scope over vP/VP.

This differentiation of two types of habitual sentences is motivated by contrasts like in (12): certain habitual sentences only allow for bare plural objects while others also allow for indefinite singular DPs (see Boneh & Doron 2013, Rimell 2004).

(12) a. **Mia** isst {# eine Karotte / Karotten}.
Mia eats a carrot carrots
'**Mia** eats {# a carrot / carrots}.'

b. **Mia** isst {eine Karotte / Karotten} zum Frühstück.
Mia eats a carrot carrots to.the breakfast
'**Mia** eats {a carrot / carrots} for breakfast.'

The contrast in (12) with respect to the indefinite singular objects arises as follows: (12a), due to the lack of potential restrictor material for *Gen*, can only be understood as a non-quantificational habitual sentence.[10] Given the low scope for *Hab*, the existential quantifier contributed by an indefinite in object position is understood as scoping over *Hab*. This scope order leads to a nonsensical interpretation for (12a) if the object is an indefinite singular DP: there is a carrot x that Mia eats over and over again, see (13).[11]

(13) $\exists x$ [carrot(x) & Hab e [eat(x)(Mia)(e)]] ×

In contrast, (12b) is a quantificational habitual sentence. The expression *zum Frühstück* 'for breakfast' motivates the presence of *Gen* and restricts it to quasi-universally quantify over breakfast events/situations involving Mia. Unlike *Hab*, *Gen* scopes high in the clause, which means that the existential quantifier contributed by an indefinite in object position is interpreted in the scope of *Gen*. As a result, the resulting

[10] The interpretation of a proper name never involves *Gen*, so a name cannot be used to motivate the presence of *Gen*.
[11] An anonymous reviewer notes that this description suggests that '# *Mia reads a book*' / '# *Mia liest ein Buch*' should not be odd since reading the same book multiple times is possible. Rimell (2004), whose observations I report here, already reports that *read* patterns with *eat* with respect to indefinite singular objects. As an acceptable example of a non-quantificational habitual with an indefinite singular object, she gives '*Mary drives a Toyota*'. The exact predictions of Rimell's proposal (and also Boneh and Doron's proposal) for the semantics of *Hab* are not fully clear to me at this point. Crucially, though, '# *One reads a book*' / '# *Man liest ein Buch*' seem to be as unacceptable as the corresponding habitual sentences with a proper name in subject position, so the parallelism central to my analysis still stands.

interpretation for indefinite singular DPs in object position is completely fine: for all (relevantly normal) breakfast situations involving Mia, there is a carrot that Mia eats, see (14).[12]

(14) Gen s [breakfast(Mia)(s)][$\exists x$ [carrot(x) & $\exists e$ [e in s & eat(x)(Mia)(e)]]] ✓

Of course, plural indefinite DPs (i.e., bare plurals) in object position should be fine with either type of habitual sentence since they allow for cumulative interpretations.

3.3. Accounting for the (un)acceptability of the indefinite singular DP in (2b) vs. (2c)

Given the obvious parallel between (2b)/(2c) and (12a)/(12b), the most straightforward proposal is to attribute the contrast between (2b) and (2c) to a difference in quantificational structure, as well. For (2b) and (2c), the difference cannot simply amount to the presence of *Hab* vs. *Gen*, though, since both examples need to contain *Gen* since *one*/*man* are interpreted generically. Hence, the main difference between these two examples must be whether *Gen* quantifies over individuals only, or whether *Gen* quantifies over individuals and situations; and whether *Gen* quantifies over situations or not, depends on the lexical material that is understood to provide the restrictor for *Gen*.

In (2b), the generic operator is restricted by *in Norwegen* 'in Norway'. Given the unacceptability of (2b) with an indefinite singular object, this locative PP apparently only locates individuals; if *Gen* were to quantify over individuals and situations, we would expect (2b) with an indefinite singular object to be acceptable, contrary to fact. Hence, the habitual interpretation understood for *eat* must be the result of *Hab*. The resulting denotation for (2b) with an indefinite singular object is given in (15).

(15) Gen x [in-Norway(x)][$\exists y$[carrot(y) & Hab e [eat(y)(x)(e)]]] ×

In (2c), the generic operator is restricted by *zum Frühstück* 'for breakfast'. Given the parallel with (12b), (2c) arguably involves *Gen* quantifying over individuals and situations. The resulting denotation for (2c) with an indefinite singular object is given in (16).

(16) Gen s, x [breakfast(x)(s)][$\exists y$[carrot(y) & $\exists e$ [e in s & eat(y)(x)(e)]]] ✓

In sum, adverbials that motivate the presence of *Gen* in sentences with impersonal *man*/*one* may lead to quantification over individuals only, as in (2b), or quantification over individuals and situations, as in (2c). The resulting quantificational structure determines which types of object DP are acceptable.

If this account of the contrasts in (2b)/(2c) and (12a)/(12b) is on the right track, the contrast between (2b) and (2c) and the analysis argued for above provide a new argument against generic quantification over individuals being analyzable as arising indirectly as a side effect of generic quantification over situations. That is, generic quantification over individuals cannot be given the same analysis as quantificational variability effects found with indefinite DPs in connection with adverbs of quantification (see Hinterwimmer 2020 for an overview of recent semantic analyses of adverbial quantification).[13]

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[12] Boneh & Doron (2013) assume that *Gen* directly quantifies over events. I assume, following Krifka et al. (1995), that *Gen* can bind individuals and situations, which may contain events. The two proposals are, strictly speaking, not equivalent, but the differences and any potential complications are orthogonal to the matter at hand.

[13] A similar point can be made with bare plural generic sentences. Boneh & Doron (2013: 179) provide the examples in (i), which show that the acceptability of the indefinite singular DP *a cigarette* in the given bare plural generic sentence also depends on the presence of the iterative adverbial *after dinner*.

(i) a. Women smoke (# a cigarette).

b. Women smoke a cigarette after dinner.

That is, the nominal predicate contributed by the bare plural *women* to the restrictor of *Gen* only induces quantification over individuals.

4. Ways to motivate the presence of *Gen* for dedicated impersonal pronouns

Coming back to the contrast in (1), the core idea behind the proposal in Section 2 is that the presence of *Gen* has to be motivated/licensed by overt material in a potential generic sentence. So far, we have seen the effect of frame PPs (e.g., *in Norway*), free adjuncts (e.g., *as*/*als*-phrases), and iterative adverbials (e.g., *for breakfast*). Example (3), which was used to illustrate the analysis of generically used *one*/*man*, is another example in which an iterative adverbial motivates the presence of *Gen*, see (17).

(17) a. **Man** arbeitet sonntags nicht.
MAN works on.Sundays not
'**One** doesn't work on Sundays.'

b. Gen s, x [on-Sunday(x)(s)][$\neg\exists e$[e in s & work(x)(e)]] (cf. the sketch in (3b))

This, of course, raises the questions: (i) which overt material can motivate the presence of *Gen*, and (ii) when a given expression motivates the presence of *Gen*, which variable(s) will *Gen* bind as a result? At this point, I cannot provide a satisfying answer to either of these questions. Instead, I will provide examples for additional ways to motivate the presence of *Gen* in connection with generically used *one*/*man* that require more detailed investigation, which has to be left to future work.

Examples (18) and (19) show that manner adverbials and contrastive focus (indicated by upper case) can motivate the presence of *Gen*. This is arguably due to the fact that they create a non-trivial focus-background-structure (see, e.g., Krifka et al. 1995).[14]

(18) **Man** liest Gedichte ??(laut) vor.
MAN reads poems loudly PRT
'**One** recites poems ??(loudly).'

(19) **Man** ISST eine Karotte.
MAN eats a carrot
'**One** EATS a carrot.'

In Section 2, we have seen that clauses with *man*/*one* are acceptable in the antecedent of (un)conditionals, even if they are unacceptable as stand-alone sentences. In generic conditionals like (20), the presence of *Gen*, which binds both occurrences of *one*/*man*, is motivated by the *if*/*when*-clause.

(20) Wenn **man** {eine Karotte / Karotten} isst, macht **man** ein Knackgeräusch.
if MAN a carrot carrots eats makes MAN a crunching.sound
'If/when **one** eats {a carrot / carrots}, **one** produces a crunching sound.'

The last type of expressions that license the presence of *Gen* are overt modal auxiliaries/verbs and other modal expressions, as illustrated in (21).

(21) **Man** muss Karotten essen.
MAN must carrots eat
'**One** has to eat carrots.'

In order to understand how modal expressions license the presence of *Gen*, we need to better understand how *Gen* interacts with various types of modal/intensional quantifiers occurring in the same clause (see Zobel 2014 for discussion).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the contrasts observed in connection with generically used dedicated impersonal pronouns in sentences like (1) and (2) are not (purely) due to restrictions connected to the grammar

[14] In this, *Gen* resembles adverbs of quantification. Just as for adverbs of quantification, the question how the restrictor and scope are built from the content of the sentence is still under debate, though the choice of content for the restrictor seems to depend on syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors, see von Fintel 1994, Hinterwimmer 2020.

of dedicated impersonal pronouns, but rather independent restrictions on the presence of *Gen* and the semantics of habitual sentences. In particular, I argued that the contrasts in (1) and (2) can be accounted for with two assumptions adopted from the literature on habitual sentences (e.g., Boneh & Doron 2013, Rimell 2004): (i) the presence of *Gen* needs to be motivated by overt material, and (ii) habituality can be expressed in two ways (i.e., via *Gen* or via *Hab*), which result in distinct quantificational structures that interact with co-occurring quantifiers in different ways.

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