Generics in English

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Generics: Two Types

- Two quite distinct phenomena have historically been called “generic”

1. Reference to a kind

2. Expressions of general regularities
The potato was first cultivated in South America.

Potatoes were introduced into Ireland by the end of the 17th century.

The Irish economy became dependent upon the potato.

These do not denote some particular potato or group of potatoes, but rather the kind, Potato (Solanum tuberosum)
Characterizing Sentences

- A potato contains vitamin C and amino acid
- Potatoes contain protein
- The potato contains thiamin

Does not express a specific episode or an isolated fact, but reports a kind of “general property”...a regularity that summarizes groups of particular episodes or facts.
Generics – two types

- The first type of “genericity” is a feature of NPs
- The second type of “genericity” is a feature of entire sentences
- The two types can occur together because one common regularity holds across individuals of a kind, and so the regularity is predicated of the kind.
Generics – two types

- When referring to kinds, we abstract away from instances, whereas when we use characterizing sentences we abstract away from particular events.

- A general law or regularity about members of a kind is naturally stated as holding of the kind.