Optional definite article use in generic expressions in German? Evidence from L1- and 2L1-speakers' performance and metalinguistic comments

Dagmar Barton

University of Hamburg (Germany)

Dagmar.Barton@gmail.com

Generic subject noun phrases address established kinds. In English, plural generic NPs require a bare subject NP such as in _horses have four legs_, whereas the use of the definite article leads to a specific reference of the subject NP *the horses*. English does not tolerate the use of the definite article with generic reference (Longobardi 1994), which is strongly supported by empirical studies with native speakers (see e.g. Montrul/Ionin 2010). In German, generic plural NPs are also usually bare and the specific reading is not available, see example 1. Moreover, plural NPs with a definite article have a specific reading. Different from English, there may be some variation with regards to the definite article in German. It has been claimed in theoretical literature, that a definite plural NP can be ambiguous between a generic and a specific reading, see example 2 (e.g. Brugger 1993, Longobardi 1994, Chierchia 1998), similar to the definite plural NP in Romance languages such as Italian or French.

1. Pferde haben vier Beine.   [√generic / Xspecific]
   horses have four legs

2. Die Pferde haben vier Beine.   [(√)generic/ √specific]
   the horses have four legs

Very little empirical evidence has been provided to support the claim of optional definite article use in generic NPs in German (but see Kupisch/Barton 2013, Barton/Kolb/Kupisch 2015, Barton forthcoming). This talk presents results of an empirical task which investigates German native speakers'-performance based on a truth value judgment task with monolingual and bilingual adults (n=43). The speakers were asked to judge the truth value of sentences with potentially ambiguous definite plural NPs, such as in example 2. A picture context was provided and answers were interpreted as an indicator of a preferred specific or generic reading of the subject NP. The results show a preference for the specific reading in both speaker groups. However, the generic reading is also frequently obtained (29% of the sentences in L1 speakers). The results speak in favor of generic NPs as a doubtful case in German, also revealed by many spontaneous comments on the perceived ambiguity of definite plural NPs (see also Kupisch/Pierantozzi 2010). In the discussion, language change and sociolinguistic issues are addressed.

Word count: 358 words

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