0. INTRODUCTION

Constructing a model-theoretic semantics for an interesting portion of a natural language such as English cannot be done in isolation. First, the semantics for one portion of the language must fit together in a consistent and motivated way with the semantics for other parts. For instance, representation of the semantics of verb aspect will ultimately impinge on the representation of the semantics of quantification. Secondly, there is an intimate connection between how one chooses to represent things and what one actually takes those things to be. Model theory, in effect, involves at least some degree of ontological commitment.

With this interaction in mind, I wish to turn to the problem of building a semantics for certain constructions of English, generic sentences,1 exemplified in (1).

(1) Dogs bark.

Two major questions arise with respect to examples such as these. First is the question of what (if anything) the terms dogs, a generic term, can be taken to denote in a sentence such as (1). Then, there is the further question of how the truth-conditions of sentences such as (1) can be adequately represented.

This paper has two purposes, though these will not always be clearly distinguished. The first purpose is informative, though to be sure an element of persuasion is inescapable: to give what seems to me a reasonable general analysis of generic terms and sentences, in the process evaluating other initially plausible alternatives. Then, given this perspective, my second purpose is to examine questions raised by this type of analysis and to survey the areas of inquiry which bear fairly directly on these questions.

My perspective on generics is largely that of Carlson [10] (henceforth RKE), and Carlson [8], [9], the latter two containing condensed descriptions of the major points of the first. The theory of RKE, or parts, has been
discussed, amended, and criticized in some more recent works, including Stump [65], [66], Farkas [30], Chierchia [15], Enç [29], and De Mey [23], [24], [25].

1. DO GENERIC TERMS DENOTE?

As a point of departure, consider the question of whether generic terms (dogs, mountains, unfriendly policemen, etc.) can be taken as denoting something, or whether they should be taken as non-denoting terms, in the sense of Russell [60]. Bacon [2] argues that such terms cannot denote, since allowing them to do so results in counterintuitive conclusions and, quite possibly, contradiction. I will not reconstruct all his arguments here, but one part runs as follows.

Let us assume, following Twardowski, that generic terms denote genera (however genera are to ultimately be characterized). It seems plausible to hold that the genus denoted by dogs has just those properties that hold of all dogs.

\[(G1) \quad G \exists x Fx \leftrightarrow \forall x (Fx \rightarrow Gx)\]

\[(\exists \text{ is the generic operator).}\]

Assuming the genera, like everything else, are self-identical, (2) follows from (G1)

\[(2) \quad \forall x [Fx \rightarrow x = \exists x Fx].\]

From (2), one can derive (3)

\[(3) \quad \forall x \forall y [x = y].\]

But, as Bacon notes, “Such extreme monism . . . is surely false.”

It also follows from (2) that if one thing has a given property, then all things have that property. This is also surely false.

He then considers the weaker principle (G3)

\[(G3) \quad \forall x [Fx \rightarrow Gx] \rightarrow G \exists x Fx.\]

(G3) is one half of the biconditional (G1). (G3), however, implies (4)

\[(4) \quad F \exists x Fx.\]

This is self-predication. Self-predication, though, leads straight to