Shared opinions: On the generalizability of predicates of personal taste

Predicates of personal taste (PPTs, e.g. *fun*, *tasty*) express an individual's – typically the first-person speaker's – subjective opinion about objects, events or situations. There exists a large body of work on how to represent the fact that the opinion expressed by a PPT is relativized to a particular attitude holder, initiated by Lasersohn's (2005) seminal paper. Crucially, Moltmann (2010) and Pearson (2013) claim that, contrary to what is often assumed, PPTs go beyond a simple first-person interpretation (see also Snyder 2013, Collins 2013). According to Pearson (2013:121), "PPTs such as *tasty* are used to make statements *about whether something is tasty to people in general*, based on first person experience" (emphasis added). Pearson and Moltmann formalize the generalizing force of PPTs by means of a generic operator, whereas Lasersohn (2005) argues against a genericity-based approach and the view that 'Rollercoasters are fun' essentially means 'Rollercoasters are fun for people in general' (Lasersohn 2005:653).

Given these disagreements about the role of genericity with PPTs, we conducted a psycholinguistic study testing the presence and empirical robustness of the generalizing effect of PPTs. To better understand the source of any potential generalizing effects, we manipulated the episodic vs. generic nature of the sentence as a whole, and whether it was a main clause or embedded under *think* or *find*. (We do not directly test whether PPTs involve a generic operator. Instead, we assess their generalizing force by testing to what extent they are interpreted as applying to 'people in general,' as Pearson and Moltmann posit.)

Experiment: We manipulated (i) the generic/episodic nature of the critical PPT-containing sentence and (ii) whether the PPT-containing clause is a main clause or embedded under *think* or *find* (Table 1). Participants (48 native English speakers) saw items like ex(1), and typed in a number to indicate how many aliens share the opinion. The study had 30 targets, each about a different 'thing', described with a different PPT, presented in a Latin-Square design. We also had 51 fillers. Nonce words and an alien planet (ex.1) were used to avoid bias from opinions about real things. The only cues for judging a PPT's generalizability (how many aliens share the opinion) is the linguistic packaging and the adjective itself.

(1) *Example item in [generic/main clause] condition. (All items had different nonce words)*
We are visiting an alien planet. You overhear one of the aliens say:
Hixes are fun.
If we randomly select 100 aliens from this planet, how many of them do you think share this alien's opinion about hixes?[1]

Table 1.	Main clause	Embedded under *think*	Embedded under *find*
Generic	(a) *Hixes are fun.*	(b) *I think hixes are fun.*	(c) *I find hixes fun.*
Episodic	(d) *That hix was fun.*	(e) *I thought that hix was fun.*	(f) *I found that hix fun.*

Hypotheses about generic/episodic manipulation: We manipulated whether the critical sentence was episodic (simple past, *that* modifying nonce noun, Table 1(d-f)) or generic (present tense, bare plural subject, Table 1(a-c)), in order to test two competing hypotheses:

Hyp1: Given that generic sentences, by definition, involve generalization, they may be perceived as more generalizable than episodic sentences ('*Generic sentence generalize*'). Thus, participants should respond with higher numbers to generic than episodic sentences.

Hyp2: In contrast, one might expect episodic sentences to be more generalizable ('*Episodic sentences generalize*'): Generic sentences do not require the speaker to have direct experience or even to agree with the generic statement (Moltmann 2010, Pearson 2013) and allow exceptions ("Potatoes are tasty, except the ones from last night, those were terrible"). In contrast, episodic sentences strongly signal that the speaker has direct experience of the

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[1] In episodic conditions, the question had the form "If we randomly select 100 aliens from this planet, how many of them do you think share this alien's opinion about the hix?"

relevant opinion/attitude and agrees with it. These properties, combined with findings from cognitive psychology that (i) direct experience has a stronger effect on attitudes than less direct information (e.g. Regan & Fazio 1977, DeLamater 2004) and (ii) humans tend to assume that one's personal experiences generalize to others (e.g. Epley & Caruso 2009), lead to the prediction that PPTs in *episodic sentences* are viewed as more generalizable.

Hypotheses about matrix clause/*think*/*find*: We also tested whether embedding PPTs under *I think/thought* (Table 1(b,e)) or *I find/found* (Table 1(c,f)) – explicitly linking it to the speaker – influences the strength of the generalization effect, compared to PPTs in main clauses (Table 1(a,d)). We compare two hypotheses:

Hyp3: Social psychologists have found that many aspects of the source person, including trustworthiness and expertise, influence processing of attitudes (e.g. Briñol & Petty 2009). If the source person explicitly affiliates themselves with a specific opinion, this may be seen as boosting their commitment to the opinion and thus their reliability. If someone holds an opinion so strongly that they explicitly (linguistically) identify themselves as the opinion-holder, then – assuming that the extension of a PPT to people in general is *rooted in the speaker's first-person experience* (as argued by Pearson and Moltmann) – a strengthened indication of the speaker's first-person commitment could strengthen the generalization as well (*'increasing generality by self-reference'*). Under this view, embedding under *I think/thought* or *I find/found* strengthens the generalizability effect of PPTs – perhaps more strongly with *find*, given that it signals subjectivity (e.g. Saebo 2009)

Hyp4: Alternatively, *delimiting* an attitude by anchoring it to a specific individual may weaken the generalizability effect: Explicit mention of one individual's mental state can signal that we are *not* dealing with a general claim: If it were general, we would not delimit it to one specific individual (e.g. according to the Maxim of quantity, Grice 1975). This **'***delimiting generality by self-reference*' hypothesis predicts that PPTs in main clauses that do *not* explicitly mention the speaker are judged to be more generalizable than embedded contexts.

Results: Fig.1 shows the mean number of aliens (out of 100) that people said share the opinion expressed in the critical sentence. 95% CIs (following Politzer-Ahles 2017) suggest that when PPTs are unembedded (Table 1(a,d)), the number of aliens judged to share the opinion is meaningful greater than 50/100, but not in the other conditions (but Episodic+think is close to being greater than 50/100). This provides experimental evidence that PPTs, in main clauses, are interpreted **as applying not only to the speaker but also to 'people (aliens) in general'** – at least to more than half of them. This supports Pearson and Moltmann.

Fig.1: How many aliens share the opinion

Linear mixed-effects regression (lmer, on z-scores) shows that **episodic sentences are more generalizable than generic ones, regardless of clause structure** (main effect, p's<.02). This supports the '*Episodic sentences generalize*' hypothesis. There is also an effect of clause structure: **PPTs in main clauses are more generalizable than PPTs embedded under *think* (p<.001) or *find* (p<.001**; *think* and *find* do not differ, p>.2). This holds for both episodic and generic conditions (no interactions): *Self-reference weakens the generality effect*.

We provide novel experimental evidence for PPTs having a generalization effect in *unembedded contexts*–supporting analyses that view PPTs as involving some kind of genericity–and (perhaps surprisingly) being more generalizable in *episodic* than generic sentences. The greater generality of episodic sentences fits with a view that personal experience boosts generality, but only if the attitude-holder is not bound by "I" in a higher clause.