

## Numerous-like predicates in bare plural generics

Janek Guerrini & Lorenzo Pinton\*

**Abstract.** In this paper, we discuss the unavailability of generic constructions when a bare plural is modified by ‘numerous’: for instance, ‘gathered students are loud’ has a salient generic reading roughly equivalent to ‘when they are gathered, students are loud’. ‘Numerous students are loud’, instead, only has a quantificational reading: it can only mean that the number of students being loud is high, and lacks a generic reading equivalent to ‘when students are numerous, they are loud’. We analyse this on a par with available analyses of the impossibility of restrictive modification by ‘numerous’ of referential definite plurals (Pinton 2022). In a nutshell, operators contributing maximality like the definite *ι* make the contribution of ‘numerous’ trivial. We also consider the more complicated case of Italian, where ‘numerous’ can in fact participate in generic readings, but only in certain syntactic configurations.

**Keywords.** bare plurals; generics; *numerous*

**1. Introduction.** It is well-known that *gather*-like and *numerous*-like predicates give rise to different patterns when combined with plural quantifiers and partitive constructions (Kroch 1974; Dowty et al. 1987; Champollion 2010), as shown in (1) and (2):

- (1) a. All the students gathered.  
b. #All the students are numerous.
- (2) a. Most of the students gathered.  
b. #Most of the students are numerous

Amiraz (2021) introduced in the picture non-proportional partitive constructions:

- (3) Forty of the students gathered/#are numerous.

In addition, Martin Hackl (p.c.) observed a contrast between the two predicates in restrictive relative clauses:

- (4) a. Jack only talked to the students that gathered.  
b. #Jack only talked to the students that were numerous.

(Hackl, p.c., in Pinton 2022)

**2. Numerous and bare plurals: an unnoticed contrast in English and Italian.** In this paper we want to point out a novel data point, consisting in the asymmetry between *gather*-like and *numerous*-like predicates when these appear in bare plural constructions:

- (5) Gathered students are loud.  
a. *Can mean:*  
In general, if a group of students is gathered, it is loud.

\* Equal contribution of the two authors; alphabetical order.

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- (6) Numerous students are loud.
- a. *Cannot mean:*  
# In general, if a group of students is numerous, it is loud.
  - b. *Can mean:*  
The number of students that are loud is higher than *s*.

The aim of this work is to test for different possible representations of bare plurals at LF in generic sentences via modification by ‘numerous’-like predicates, given what has been recently claimed about the properties of such predicates.

Indeed, the source of the unavailability of (6-a) cannot lie simply in some resistance of *numerous* to restrict the generic quantifier. Consider Italian, which has two possible adjective-noun orders and can express generic sentences both via definite plurals and (modified) bare plurals: the only reading of (7-b) is generic.

- (7) a. QUANTIFICATIONAL: PRE-NOMINAL ADJECTIVE, BARE PLURAL  
Numerosi studenti fanno rumore.  
Numerous students make noise.  
*‘The number of students being loud is bigger than *n*’*
- b. GENERIC: POST-NOMINAL ADJECTIVE; BARE PLURAL  
Studenti numerosi fanno rumore.  
Students numerous make noise.  
*‘When they are numerous, students are loud.’*
- c. DEVIANT: POST-NOMINAL ADJECTIVE; DEFINITE PLURAL  
#Gli studenti numerosi fanno rumore.  
The students numerous make noise.  
*(deviant)*

In this paper, we first want to offer an explanation for the Italian data, relying on Pinton’s (2022) observations with regards to modification by ‘numerous’ in contexts such as (4-b), and connecting recent theories of adjectival modification in Italian and English (Cinque 2014; Martin 2022; Guerrini 2024a) with theories of genericity and bare/definite noun interpretation in these languages (Chierchia 1998; Longobardi 2001). We then extend our account to English. More specifically, we argue that this data might provide evidence for ‘ambiguity’ approaches to Italian generics such as Longobardi (2001). More tentatively, we suggest that this data may provide evidence for a lowest type constraint on GEN, the silent adverbial quantifier that is standardly taken to give rise to generic quantification.

**3. The deviance of generic construals of (6) and (7-c), in a nutshell.** the observations reported in Pinton’s (2022) about the impossibility for ‘numerous’ to effectively restrict the pluralized predicates it combines with whenever maximality applies on top. In fact, the maximal element of  $\llbracket \text{numerous students} \rrbracket^{gc}$  is the same as the maximal element of unmodified  $\llbracket \text{students} \rrbracket^{gc}$ , as illustrated in the figure below. Consider that the presence of maximality is crucial for a claim based on the unavailability of ‘vacuous restriction’, as ‘numerous’ does indeed modify the denotation of the entire predicate, but the maximal element is inevitably the same.

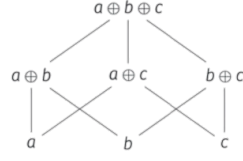


Figure 1:  $[[*student]]^{9c} = \{a, b, c, a \oplus b, a \oplus c, b \oplus c, a \oplus b \oplus c\}$



Figure 1:  $[t(*student)]^{9c} = a \oplus b \oplus c$

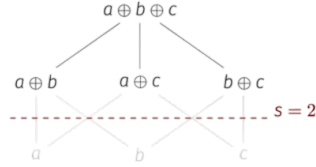


Figure 1:  $[[numerous *student]]^{9c} = \{a \oplus b, a \oplus c, b \oplus c, a \oplus b \oplus c\}$

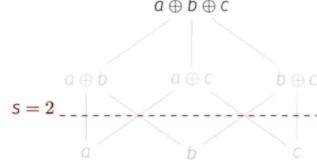


Figure 1:  $[t(numerous *student)]^{9c} = a \oplus b \oplus c$

In a nutshell, here we argue that the deviance of (6) and (7-c) is equally due to ‘numerous’ being trivial whenever defined. Only some approaches to bare plural generics assume that English bare plurals involve a kind-forming maximality operator  $\cap$ , namely kind-based approaches like Chierchia (1998) and ‘ambiguity’ approaches like Longobardi (2001), but not approaches on which bare plurals are simply weak indefinites as Diesing (1992). We argue that assuming Pinton’s analysis of (4-b), the deviance of the modification by ‘numerous’ of bare plurals provides a test for the presence of a maximality operator at LF in these constructions, and therefore argues for (a variant of) kind-based approaches. A similar reasoning goes for Italian kind-denoting definite plurals. For these cases, however, virtually all accounts agree about the presence of a kind-forming operator at LF. What requires more explanation are (7-a) and (7-b), to which we now turn.

#### 4. Explaining the Italian pattern. Let us summarize the Italian data from (7).<sup>1</sup>

| Expression   | Generic reading | Quantificational reading |
|--|-----------------|--------------------------|
| bare plural, pre-nominal ‘numerous’<br>(‘ <i>numerosi studenti</i> ’)          | *               | ✓                        |
| bare plural, post-nominal ‘numerous’<br>(‘ <i>studenti numerosi</i> ’)         | ✓               | *                        |
| definite plural, post-nominal ‘numerous’<br>(‘ <i>Gli studenti numerosi</i> ’) | *               | *                        |

Table 1

Explaining this pattern requires considering facts about the syntax-semantics interface of pre- and post-nominal modification in Italian.

In seminal work, Cinque (2010) seminal pointed out that in Italian, the two possible noun-adjective word orders are associated with different semantic properties. In a nutshell, context-sensitive adjectives seem to only be able to directly compose with the noun in pre-nominal po-

<sup>1</sup> We leave the definite plural with pre-nominal ‘numerous’ for the end of this paper, as it involves a separate discussion,

sition (see the unavailability of (8-b), (10-b)). By contrast, they seem to also be able to compose with implicit variables in post-nominal position (see the availability (9-b), (11-b)).

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>(8) un bravo avvocato<br/> A skillful lawyer<br/> a. A lawyer good-as-a-lawyer<br/> b. #A lawyer good-as-a-<i>{relevant activity}</i></p> | <p>(9) un avvocato bravo<br/> A lawyer skillful<br/> a. A lawyer good-as-a-lawyer<br/> b. A lawyer good-as-a-<i>{relevant activity}</i></p> |
| <p>(10) un falso orologio<br/> a fake watch<br/> a. looks like a watch but isn't one<br/> b. #looks like a Rolex but isn't one</p>           | <p>(11) un orologio falso<br/> a watch fake<br/> a. looks like a watch but isn't one<br/> b. looks like a Rolex but isn't one</p>           |

Recent accounts of adjective positions in Italian propose the following (see Martin, 2022; see also Guerrini, 2024a):

- (12) **Pre-nominal position**  $\Rightarrow$  **Functional Application:**  

$$\llbracket \text{skillful}_{\langle \langle e,t \rangle, \langle e,t \rangle \rangle} \rrbracket (\llbracket \text{lawyer}_{\langle e,t \rangle} \rrbracket) = \lambda x. \text{skillful}(\llbracket \text{lawyer}_{\langle e,t \rangle} \rrbracket)(x)$$
- (13) **Post-nominal position**  $\Rightarrow$  **Predicate Modification:**  

$$\llbracket \text{skillful}_{\langle \langle e,t \rangle, \langle e,t \rangle \rangle} \rrbracket (R_{\langle e,t \rangle}) \cap \llbracket \text{lawyer}_{\langle e,t \rangle} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \text{skillful}(R)(x) \wedge \text{lawyer}(x)$$

(with  $R$  a contextually relevant property)

4.1. BARE PLURAL, PRE-NOMINAL ‘NUMEROSI’. How does this inform us about pre-nominal ‘numerous’ in Italian? It is well-known that quantificational adjectives have both a Generalized Quantifier denotation and a predicative denotation, as illustrated below:

- (14) Numerous people attended the lecture.  

$$\llbracket \text{numerous}_{\langle et, \langle et, t \rangle \rangle} \rrbracket (\llbracket \text{people}_{\langle e, t \rangle} \rrbracket) (\llbracket \text{attended the lecture}_{\langle e, t \rangle} \rrbracket)$$
- (15) The people attending the lecture were numerous.  

$$\llbracket \text{numerous}_{\langle et \rangle} \rrbracket (\llbracket \text{the people attending the lecture}_e \rrbracket)$$

Since we expect quantificational adjectives compose with the noun via Functional Application in pre-nominal position, we predict the availability of quantificational readings like (16-b). Since there can be no Predicate Modification with the noun, we expect the unavailability of a reading in which the denotation of ‘numerous’ is intersected with the denotation of ‘students’ – which would have been needed to generate the generic reading in (16-a). This yields the correct prediction for the first line of Table 1.

- (16) Numerosi studenti fanno rumore.  
Numerous students make noise.
- a. *Cannot mean:*  
# In general, if a group of students is numerous, they are loud.
- b. *Can mean:*  
The number of students that are loud is higher than  $n$ .

4.2. POST-NOMINAL ‘NUMEROSI’ WITH BARE AND DEFINITE PLURALS. In post-nominal position, ‘numerosi’ necessarily composes with the noun via Predicate Modification.

We have taken care of the part concerning modification. Now we turn to explaining the contrast between (7-b) and (7-c) (i.e., between the second and the third line of table 1), which requires considering two theories of the expression of kind reference and genericity in Italian, Chierchia (1998) and Longobardi (2001).

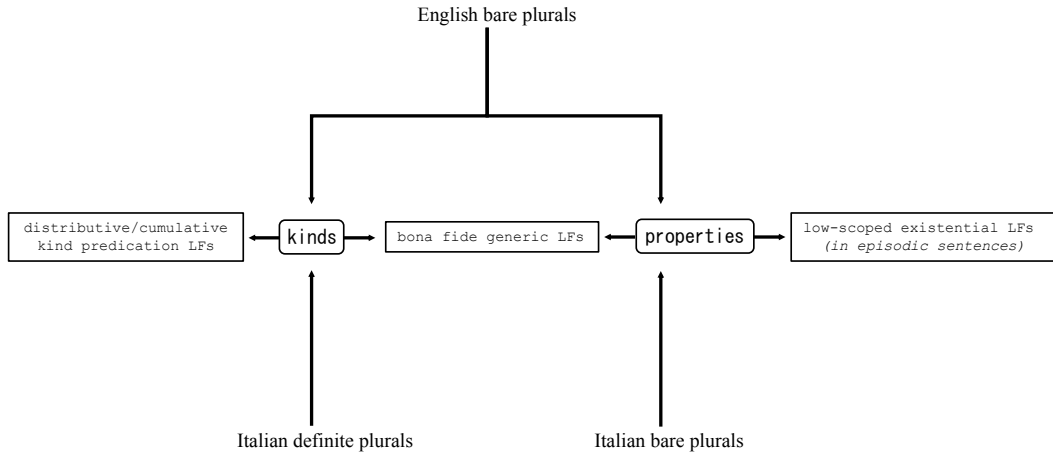
On Chierchia’s (1998) approach, Italian definite plurals can denote kinds, which involves the kind forming operator  $\cap$ , an intensionalized version of  $\iota$  defined below:

$$(17) \quad \cap[\lambda w.\lambda x.P_w(x)] = \begin{cases} \lambda w.\iota x[\lambda y.P_w^*(y)](x) & \text{if there are } Ps \text{ at } w \\ \text{undefined} & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (\text{Chierchia 1998})$$

We begin by noting that, combined with Pinton’s maximality-triviality facts, this correctly predicts the deviance of (7-c). Indeed, for any world  $w$ ,  $\iota x[\lambda y.student_w^*(y) \wedge numerous_w(y)](x)$  is either undefined or trivial. It is undefined if there aren’t more than  $s$  students to begin with at that world, with  $s$  the standard for numerosity. If it is defined at a world  $w$ , ‘numerous’ is trivial, since in that case,  $\iota x[\lambda y.student_w^*(y) \wedge numerous_w(y)](x) = \iota x[\lambda y.student_w^*(y)](x)$ . In other words, if Pinton’s observations are correct, we expect that when kind formation applies on top of an NP in which ‘numerous’ combines with a (pluralized) property, it should yield triviality whenever defined.

Turning to Italian bare plurals, in Chierchia’s (1998) system they involve a silent determiner, which is interpreted as the kind forming operator  $\cap$ , just like definite plurals. Note then that as a consequence, as stated this account would predict the LFs of (7-b) and (7-c) to behave in parallel ways. But as (7-b) shows, post-nominal modification by ‘numerous’ with Italian bare plurals is in fact possible, and yields the generic reading that is absent both from English bare plurals and from Italian definite plurals.

Let us now turn to Longobardi (2001). Longobardi takes Italian definite plurals to be interpreted as kinds, thus involving maximality, but - unlike Chierchia - takes Italian bare plurals to be interpreted as ‘weak indefinites’. Moreover, Longobardi takes English bare plurals to be ambiguous between a kind-denoting expression and a weak indefinite. We here consider a version of Longobardi’s theory where ‘weak indefinite’ simply means that an expression denotes a property (see e.g. Cohen, 2022; Guerrini, 2024b). This is illustrated below (diagram from Guerrini, 2024b):



The main argument for the fact that Italian bare plurals denote properties and English bare plurals are ambiguous between a kind and a property comes from the possible interpretations of bare plurals in episodic contexts. Consider the contrast between (18) and (19): while the English sentence can convey both that the tax inspector insulted all taxpayers and that he insulted some of them, the Italian sentence can only convey that he insulted some of them (see Guerrini, 2024b; Guerrini & Spector, To appear; for the possibility of universal readings with bare plurals in English, see Dayal, 2013; Chierchia, 2022; for a different version of the argument from the comparison between English and Italian bare plurals, see Longobardi, 2001).

- (18) The tax inspector insulted taxpayers.  
 a. ...insulted all taxpayers.  
 b. ...insulted some taxpayers.
- (19) L'ispettore fiscale ha insultato contribuenti.  
 The'inspector fiscal has insulted taxpayers.  
 a. #...insulted all taxpayers.  
 b. ...insulted some taxpayers.

Existential readings in non-generic contexts can be accounted for by (low-scoped) existential closure of the property denoted by the bare plural. This explains (18-b) and (19-b). The universal reading can be ascribed to the fact that English bare plurals additionally have a kind-level interpretation, as witnessed by classic examples such as (20), where they are felicitous with kind-specific predicates (see Longobardi, 2001; see Guerrini, 2024b on how to derive universal/distributive readings from kind-level expressions).

- (20) Dodos are extinct.

To this point, it is also worth noticing that Italian definite plurals, which in Longobardi-style frameworks are unambiguously kind-denoting, only have universal readings in sentences parallel to (18) and (19).

- (21) L'ispettore fiscale ha insultato i contribuenti.  
 The'inspector fiscal has insulted the taxpayers.  
 a. ...insulted all taxpayers.  
 b. #...insulted some taxpayers.

| Expression              | Denotation in Longobardi-style frameworks | Universal reading in non-generic contexts | Existential reading in non-generic contexts |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| English Bare Plural     | kind or property                          | ✓   | ✓   |
| Italian Bare Plural     | property                                  | #   | ✓   |
| Italian Definite Plural | kind                                      | ✓   | #   |

Table 2. Summary table of the Longobardi-style view we are arguing for.

Let us now show why the contrast between (7-b) and (7-c) is in fact predicted on this view. If the bare plural denotes a property, there is no maximization on top of the NP in which 'numerous' modifies the noun. The denotation of 'studenti numerosi' will therefore be systematically

distinct from the denotation of ‘studenti’: at worlds in which there aren’t enough students for the standard of numerosity to be met, ‘numerosi studenti’ will be empty, while ‘studenti’ not necessarily vacuous. For instance, if the standard for numerosity is 2, at a world  $w$  where there is only one student  $a$ ,  $\lambda x.student_w^*(x) = \{a\}$ , but  $\lambda x.student_w^*(x) \wedge numerous_w(x) = \emptyset$ . Crucially, if a world contains a number of students higher than the standard for numerosity, ‘numerosi’ will *not* be trivial, as can be seen by looking at the left part of Figure 1 (and this contrasts with what happens in the presence of maximality; see the right part of Figure 1).

(22) If  $s = 2$  and we are at a world  $w$  where  $\lambda x.student_w(x) = \{a, b, c\}$ , then:

- a.  $\lambda x.student_w^*(x) = \{a, b, c, a \oplus b, a \oplus c, b \oplus c, a \oplus b \oplus c\}$
- b.  $\lambda x.student_w^*(x) \wedge numerous_w(x) = \{a \oplus b, a \oplus c, b \oplus c, a \oplus b \oplus c\}$

As a consequence, unlike the Italian definite plural, the Italian bare plural is expected to not result in infelicity via triviality. As shown in (23), the generic quantifier GEN is restricted by a property in sentences with bare plurals, and by a trivially modified kind in sentences with definite plural like (24).

(23) Studenti numerosi fanno rumore. [GENERIC]  
Students numerous make noise.

$$GEN_{w,x}[student_w^*(x) \wedge numerous_w(x)][make\ noise_w(x)]$$

(24) #Gli studenti numerosi fanno rumore. [DEVIANT]  
The students numerous make noise.

$$GEN_{w,x}[x \leq \underbrace{\cap[\lambda w'.\lambda y.student_{w'}^*(y) \wedge numerous_{w'}(y)]_w}_{\text{either undefined at } w, \text{ or 'numerous' is trivial at } w}][make\ noise_w(x)]$$

4.3. SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSIS OF THE ITALIAN PATTERN. Let us summarize what we have argued so far. Concerning the first line of Table 1, we know that there cannot be Predicate Modification in pre-nominal position. However, *numerosi* can combine via Functional Application with *studenti*, and output a Quantifier-type expression. This correctly predicts that in pre-nominal position, the only possible reading is quantificational.

Turning to the second and third line, we assume that Q-adjectives combine via Predicate Modification in post-nominal position. Generics in Italian can be expressed through bare plurals, in which case the restriction of GEN is populated by a property, and the generic reading is available. This explains the pattern in the second line in 1. Generics can also be expressed via definite plurals, in which case the restriction will be populated by a kind. Kind formation involves maximality, which makes ‘numerous’ trivial whenever defined, whence the deviance of definite plural generics modified by ‘numerous’. This takes care of the third line of table 1.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> We here do not focus on the case of definite plurals where ‘numerous’ is pre-nominal, as in (i) below.

- (i) I numerosi studenti fanno rumore.  
The numerous students make noise.  
‘(The) students, which are numerous, are loud’.

The reason for this is that the generic reading is available in this case just like it is available in the case of non-restrictive relative clauses in English. Given that the DP is definite, the quantifier-level interpretation of ‘numerous’ is unavailable (‘gli studenti’ cannot provide a property restricting it). This leaves a ‘non-restrictive relative clause’/supplemental (à la Potts 2004) interpretation as the only one available, meaning that ‘numerous’ is *predicated of*

**5. English: explaining the unavailability of a generic reading.** Let us start from adjectival modification in English. English word order is known to mostly underspecify whether the adjective modifies the noun from a Direct Modification source or from a Reduced Relative Clause source (Cinque 2010).

With this in mind, we can already notice that the quantificational reading is expected: it arises from the Direct Modification parse, which determines Functional Application with the noun.

What requires discussion is the absence of a generic reading. We saw that, in Italian, (plural) generics are expressed with bare plurals (type  $\langle et \rangle$ ) or with definite plurals ( $\langle s, e \rangle$ ). In English, in contrast, (plural) generics are only expressed with bare plurals. For English bare plurals, a Chierchia-style, ‘kinds-first’ approach very naturally predicts the impossibility of a generic reading. Since English bare plurals are kind-denoting in generic sentences, they are straightforwardly expected to yield triviality whenever defined, in ways completely parallel to how Italian kind-denoting definite plurals are expected to behave. Let us also notice that any approach viewing bare plurals as unambiguously denoting weak indefinites will not predict triviality in Pinton’s sense due to the absence of maximality at LF. This is for instance the case of Diesing’s (1992) account.

We have argued that Longobardi’s account makes correct predictions for Italian bare plurals, unlike Chierchia’s. However, as formulated, it cannot capture the behavior of English. Remember that Longobardi assumes that English bare plurals are ambiguous between a kind-denoting expression and a weak indefinite (which here we taking to be a property-level reading). On their weak indefinite construals, they would therefore be predicted to be felicitous on a generic reading just like the Italian bare plural with post-nominal ‘numerous’.

**(25) The two LFs predicted by Longobardi’s approach**

Numerous students are loud.

- a. Property-level construal of the Bare Plural:

$$\text{GEN}_{w,x}[\underbrace{\text{student}_w^*(x) \wedge \text{numerous}_w(x)}_{\text{‘numerous’ non-trivial}}][\text{make noise}_w(x)]$$

- b. Kind-level construal of the Bare Plural:

$$\text{GEN}_{w,x}[x \leq \underbrace{\cap[\lambda w'. \lambda y. \text{student}_{w'}^*(y) \wedge \text{numerous}_{w'}(y)]_w}_{\text{either undefined at } w, \text{ or ‘numerous’ is trivial at } w}}][\text{make noise}_w(x)]$$

We leave this open here, but would like to suggest one way out for a Longobardi-style account. It is possible that GEN obeys a lowest-type constraint, which forces it to be restricted by the lowest-

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the sum of students (the kind interpreted at the evaluation world) rather than modifying the kind. In other words, the function denoted by ‘numerous’ is *applied* (via Functional Application) to the entity denoted by the noun, rather than modifying the noun before maximisation, i.e. being intersected with the property-level interpretation of the noun. We leave a compositional implementation of this to future research, but it is clear that the desired LF is as in (ii) (assuming a two-dimensional treatment of appositive relative clauses).

- (ii) Students, which are numerous, are loud.

**At-issue meaning:**  $\text{GEN}_{w,x}[x \leq \cap[\lambda w'. \lambda y. \text{student} * (y)]_w][\text{make noise}_w]$

**Supplemental meaning:**  $\text{numerous}_w(\cap[\lambda w'. \lambda y. \text{student} * (y)]_w)$

And similarly for the Italian definite with pre-nominal ‘numerous’.



typed denotation that an expression can have. This would explain why English bare plurals cannot have the generic interpretation with ‘numerous’ that Italian bare plural have: indeed, when licensed, Italian bare plurals unambiguously denote properties.

**6. Discussion and open issues.** Consider the contrast in (26) (Adrian Ommundsen, p.c.):

- (26) a. Numerous hyenas are dangerous. *(no generic interpretation available)*  
 b. One hyena is not dangerous, but numerous hyenas are. *(generic interpretation available)*  
 c. Few hyenas aren’t dangerous, but numerous hyenas are. *(generic interpretation available)*

It is puzzling that ellipsis and/or deaccenting make available a reading that seems otherwise unavailable. We currently do not have a fully fledged explanation for this. Notice however that parallelism would require the sentences before and after the comma to have a similar structure and that the quantificational reading seems to require the addition of ‘others’: in (27), forcing the indefinite to be specific makes the generic interpretation unavailable. But without ‘others’ restricting ‘numerous’, the sentence is not natural.<sup>3</sup>

- (27) a. One hyena I know isn’t dangerous, but numerous ??{others} are.  
 b. Few hyenas aren’t dangerous, but numerous {others} are.  
*(no quantificational reading without ‘others’)*

It is possible then that in the absence of a quantificational reading in (26-b,c) the lowest-type constraint we have hypothesised for GEN is lifted to accommodate a felicitous reading, i.e. GEN is allowed to be restricted by the property-level construal in that case (and only in that case). We leave this to future research.

**7. Conclusion and summary.** In this note, we have accounted for the availability of generic readings of NPs modified by ‘numerous’ in Italian and English. For Italian, we have argued (i) that the quantificational reading is the only one possible when ‘numerous’ applies directly via Functional Application to students. (ii) When ‘numerous’ occurs post-nominally, it can only restrict GEN if the noun denotes a property, i.e. if the noun is bare. (iii) With definite plurals, the interplay between the maximality imposed by kind formation and the logical properties of numerous results in triviality, following Pinton’s (2022) account of the infelicity of modification by ‘numerous’ with referential plurals. As for English, we argued (i) that ‘numerous’ can compose via FA, resulting in the observed quantificational reading. (ii) When it composes via Predicate Modification, it results in triviality, because bare nouns in English can denote kinds when restricting GEN. If we follow Longobardi (2001), English bare plurals also have a property-level interpretation, but this does not correspond to a felicitous reading of the sentence. This has led us to speculate although GEN is a type-flexible operator, it comes with a constraint that requires to bind the lowest possible type of a given expression.

<sup>3</sup> Possibly for reasons that might involve avoiding contradictions.

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