The appropriateness of distinguishing dispositions from habituals has been called into question both from the linguistic and from the philosophical point of view. Thus, for instance, Carlson (1988) argues in favor of an underlying unity of generic sentences expressing habits or dispositions or laws, on the grounds that such sentences seem to share the same expression cross-linguistically, and contrast as a whole with episodic sentences. Individual-level predicates have been subsequently integrated into this unity by Chierchia’s (1995) hypothesis, according to which they are inherently generic. Moreover, it has been suggested that both dispositions and habits may be reduced to the same format of restricted quantification. Counterfactual conditional accounts can be thought of as reducing habits to a particular (counterfactual-supporting) conception of dispositions, whereas habitual accounts of dispositions operate a reduction in the other direction (Fara, forthc.).

However, some recent studies on the syntax and semantics of habitual aspect markers (most notably Boneh & Doron 2008) show that a distinction should be drawn between “gnomic” and “actualized” habituality, the former showing most of the properties that characterize what are usually called dispositions. This distinction is reminiscent of the distinction between modal and quantitative gnomic sentences due to Zuber (1989), in which Laca (1990) had thought to see a clue for understanding the different interpretations of bare plurals in object position in English generic sentences.

In this presentation, I will re-examine the evidence presented in Laca (1990) for the correlation between the obligatorily nominalized, kind-interpretation of a bare plural object and the dispositional nature of the generic statement. I will show that the distinction between “generic” and “existential” objects not only correlates with the contrast between definite and bare objects in Spanish, but also with the contrast between bare singular and bare plural objects in Brazilian Portuguese. I will devote particular attention to the role of non-agentive subjects in triggering kind interpretations for the object, showing that the generalizations put forth in Laca (1990) fall short of recognizing a crucial difference between non-agentive “effects” (with affected objects, as in Cyanide kills mice) and non-agentive verbs of creation (with effected objects, as in Underwater currents build sand banks), which parallels that between emotive and “locational” individual-level states states.

Fara, M. (forthc) Dispositions and habituals, in Noûs.