This talk argues that generic sentences are topic constructions crosslinguistically, supporting Lee’s 1996 initial claim, but argues against Cohen et al.’s 2002 claim that focused bare plurals are interpreted existentially.

Generic sentences are about generic DPs, which function as Topics as semantic definites such as a bare singular common noun with a Topic marker in Korean, bare plurals (or indefinite singular) in English, and definites in French, typically combined with individual-level predicates of characterizing or kind-referring nature, as follows:

(1) a. Say-\text{nun} nal-n-ta        (2) a. Birds fly. /A bird flies.
   \hspace{1cm} bird-TOP fly-PRES-DEC   \hspace{1cm} b. Water is transparent
   ‘Birds fly.’

b. Mwul-\text{un} thwumyen-\text{ha}-ta (3) a. Les oiseaux volent.
   \hspace{1cm} water-TOP transparent   \hspace{1cm} b. L’eau est transparent.
   ‘Water is transparent.’

An existential sentence in Korean, on the other hand, has a NOM(inative) marker in the subject DP and is PL(ural)-marked, followed by a stage-level predicate, as opposed to the atemporal PRES predicate in (1a). Such an existential sentence has a hidden Background Topic of *hic et nunc*, as in (2):

(2) Say-tul-i/\text{ka} nal-a ka-ko is-s-ta
   \hspace{1cm} bird-PL-NOM fly-go-PROG-DEC
   ‘Birds are flying.’

Such an existential sentence as a whole, as a reply to “What’s happening?,” has a Focus, not just its existential DP, contra Cohen et al 2002. (In Finnish, NOM is used for Topic and individual-level and PARTitive for existential and stage-level.)

Either an existential DP in (2) or a generic DP in (1) can have a Contrastive Focus (CF) with heavy stress, as a reply to an accommodated alternative disjunctive question, “Which are altruistic? Firemen or swindlers?” The DP as its answer “FIREMEN are altruistic” is CF-marked, as a generic DP still, not as an existential DP. In this situation, the Topic S “[Firemen]TOP are altruistic” is subsumed and the CF-marked FIREMEN is NOM-marked in Korean (sopangkwan-i/ka). This is against Cohen et al.’s generalization that focused bare plurals are existentials and their claim that this particular case is Contrastive Topic is not justified; the context of a question like “Are both firemen and swindlers altruistic?” must precede the answer with CT “[FIREMEN]CT(L+H*LH%)/(\text{-nun} with high pitch in K) are altruistic.” Then, the CT S must have a scalar implicature “But [SWINDLERS]CT are not.” CF and CT can also apply to existential Ss such as (2) and “Firemen are available.” The CT existential is also triggered by a preceding alternative disjunctive question and the CT existential is triggered by a preceding inclusive question as in the CT generic. Therefore, CF and CT cannot make distinction between existential and generic sentences, contra Cohen et al.

A Background Topic of location induces an existential sentence even when it involves an individual-level predicate, as in (3), and if the nominal ‘monkey’ happens to be TOP-marked (singular + TOP in K), then it is forced to be interpreted as generically and the sentence becomes a false statement, as in (3c):

(3) a. Monkeys live in that tree.
b. ce namwu-ey-nun wonswungi-tul-i/ka sal-n-ta
   that tree-in-TOP monkey-PL-NOM live-PRES-DEC
   ‘In that tree, monkeys live.’ [If ‘monkey’ is also TOP-marked it becomes a CT.]

c. wonswungi-nun ce nawu-eye sal-n-ta
   monkey-TOP that tree-in live-PRES-DEC
   ‘For monkeys in general it holds: they live in that tree.’ [‘that tree’ can be CT-marked.]

A similar ambiguity is resolved depending on which element is TOP-marked in (4):

(4) Hurricanes arise in this part of the Pacific.

I proposed a dual variable binding for a generic Topic operator of TOP $[x, x']$ (Lee 1996) to resolve the following binding PL-Singular agreement discrepancy in spoken French:

(5) Les chats, c’est gentil.

$X$ can stand for the kind/category and $x$ its token or specimen. A bare singular common noun in Korean and many other languages can represent natural (flower, etc.), artifact (furniture, etc.), and functional kinds (school, etc.) for kind-reference (Dodos are extinct), and generic characterization (Birds fly) by being TOP-marked. The basic kind/category $↑bird$ can be posited and type-shifted for a generic Topic operation with the dual variable binding. See (6):

(6) $TOPG x, [C(x, ↑bird)][fly (x_o)]$ (cf. Lee 1996, ter Meulen 1995)

The numeral classifier construction in many classifier languages including Korean cannot be a generic Topic construction and basically forms an existential episodic sentence. Consider:

(7) say sey mari “bird three CL”
   a. (English) $\lambda w \lambda x [ATOM(w)(3)(x) \land ↑bird (x)]$ (cf. Krifka 2004)
   b. (Korean) $\lambda w \lambda x [CLASS(↑bird)(w)(3)(x) \land ↑bird (w)(x)]$

(7) must be followed by a NOM marker and an episodic predicate to be grammatical. See:

(8) -ka nal-a ka-ko iss-ta (*-nun nal-a ka-ko iss-ta)
   -NOM fly-A-go-PROG-DEC -TOP are flying
   ‘(Three birds) are flying.’

The bare common noun is basic and TOP-marking is required for generic expressions in Korean and the basic kind/category label can be shifted to various other types like indefinite existential, plural distributive, definite, numeral classifier, and so on. CF, CT, and focus-related marking cannot distinguish between generic and existential sentences because it freely occurs and the scope of focus ranges broadly in existential sentences.

Selected References
Krifka, M. 2004 “Bare NPs: Kind-referring, Indefinites, Both, or Neither?” Proceedings of SALT.
ter Meulen, A. 1995 “Semantic Constraints on Type-Shifting Anaphora,” in Carlson and Pelletier (eds), 339-357.