

Plural epistemic indefinites: clusivity and paucity

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Context. It has been noticed that, in certain contexts (e.g., questions, conditionals, negation), bare plurals are interpreted inclusively in a number of languages, i.e., referring to ‘more than one,’ but also to ‘one’ (Krifka, 1989; Farkas and de Swart, 2010; Hoeksema, 1983; Schwarzschild, 1996; Sauerland et al., 2005; Bale et al., 2011; Grimm, 2012; Martí, 2020).

- (1) a. How many children do you have? 1+
- b. If you have children, raise your hand. 1+
- c. I don’t have children. 1+

For instance, (1a) can be answered by ‘three,’ but also by ‘one;’ (1b) is true if parents with two or more children raise their hands, but also if parents with only one child raise their hands; and (1c) is false if I have two or more children, but also if I have only one child.

Puzzle. This paper focuses on plural epistemic indefinites (henceforth, EIs); these are indefinite determiners or pronouns that convey information about a speaker’s epistemic state (i.e., they signal a speaker’s lack of knowledge or ignorance about the referents they are associated with), as described by Alonso-Ovalle and Menéndez-Benito (2003, 2010, 2013a). We observe that, in some languages, plural EIs behave differently from regular bare nouns with regard to clusivity. For example, in Spanish and French, plural EIs are interpreted exclusively (note that, under negation, a plural EI is odd or interpretable with wide scope); EIs in Spanish also lose their conventionalized ignorance in plural form (Alonso-Ovalle and Menéndez-Benito, 2011, 2013b).

- (2) a. ¿Has leído algunos libros? ‘Did you read ALGÚN books?’ 2+
- b. Si has leído algunos libros, levanta la mano. ‘If you have read ALGÚN books, raise your hand.’ 2+

Moreover, we observe that in German, plural EIs are interpreted inclusively; it has also been noted independently that EIs in German retain conventionalized ignorance in plural form.

- (3) a. Hast du irgendwelche Bücher? ‘Do you have IRGENDEIN books?’ 1+
- b. Wenn du irgendwelche Bücher hast, heb die Hand. ‘If you have IRGENDEIN books, raise your hand.’ 1+

What is the nature of this parameter? Is it linked to the ignorance parameter?

Proposal. We propose that the crosslinguistic interpretive variation exhibited by plural EIs is based on paucity, and argue that, while “plural” EIs in Spanish are paucal determiners, plural EIs in German are not. Plurals are [+additive] and [-atomic], but paucals are neither (Harbour, 2011, 2014). Following Dali and Mathieu (2021) and their two number projection proposal, we put forward the idea that plural EIs in German are generated in Num1, while paucal EIs in Spanish are generated in Num2, a higher number phrase.

Since Spanish *algunos* clearly does not contain atoms, as shown in (2), our proposal as to why EIs in some languages lose conventionalized ignorance in plural form necessarily differs from that of Alonso-Ovalle and Menéndez-Benito (2011, 2013b). On their view, plural EIs in Spanish contain atomic elements in addition to pluralities, giving rise to a contradiction (i.e., while plural noun phrases denote sets containing both atomic and plural individuals, plural morphology in the determiner imposes a proper plural requirement). In contrast, we propose that paucal EIs lose conventionalized ignorance because they generate a competing scalar implicature instead of the implicature triggered by the antisingleton constraint in the singular form.

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