

Plurality and Referentiality

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Instances of a noun's plural form which appear to include reference to singular entities, as in (1), have long been puzzling. Based on such examples, many researchers have argued that the semantic form of plural nouns is inclusive, designating 'one or more' (including atomic entities), rather than exclusive, i.e. 'more than one'. Sauerland et al. (2005) further relate the inclusive reading to downward-entailing (DE) environments, claiming number "marking on indefinites in a downward entailing environment does not affect truth conditions".

- (1) a. Q: Do you have children?
A: Yes, I have one.
- b. Ed didn't see dogs. (False if Ed saw one dog)

This talk presents experimental and empirical evidence that the inclusive readings (i) cannot be causally related to DE-environments, as this association both under- and over-generates and (ii) cannot be associated with indefinites in general, but only with non-specific/non-referential indefinites. Instead, the data indicate that the key factor is whether the indefinite can be construed as non-referential/generic, which favors inclusive readings, or referential, which resists them. The contexts which permit inclusive readings, e.g. negation and interrogatives, are shown to be just those which may in general block referential commitment; I argue this lack of referential commitment promotes inclusive plural readings. I then discuss the typological prediction of this account, namely that inclusive plural readings should only occur in languages for which the bare plural has generic uses, a claim which receives support from languages such as Armenian.

References

Sauerland, U., J. Anderssen, and K. Yatsushiro (2005). "The Plural Is Semantically Unmarked". In S. Kepser and M. Reis, eds., *Linguistic Evidence: Empirical, Theoretical and Computational Perspectives*, pp. 413–434. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.