

Two Types of Weak Determiners: Evidence from Spanish*

(Work in Progress)

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[ABSTRACT]

Weak determiners have both a presuppositional and a non presuppositional reading. Two ways of accounting for this fact have been proposed. The Ambiguity Approach (Partee 1989, Diesing 1992, de Hoop 1992) posits that weak determiners are ambiguous. The Pragmatic Approach (Büring 1996) claims that we do not need to postulate an ambiguity in the semantics: the presuppositional reading arises as a result of presuppositions triggered by topic/focus marking. In this paper we explore the possibility that both theories are needed. We present as evidence the behavior of two Spanish weak determiners, *unos* and *algunos*. *Algunos* can get a presuppositional reading independently of topic/focus marking, as predicted by the Ambiguity Approach. *Unos*, on the other hand, exhibits the behavior predicted by the Pragmatic Approach: it is presuppositional only when marked either as contrastive topic or as focus.

1. The Ambivalent Behavior of Weak Determiners

Weak determiners have both a presuppositional and a non-presuppositional reading. Take, for instance, *some*. In a situation where the existence of a group of children is presupposed, the sentence in (1) says that a subgroup of them entered the garden (as opposed, presumably, to other members of the group). In that case, (1) can be paraphrased as ‘some of the children entered the garden’. The sentence in (1) can also be used in a situation where no group of children is contextually relevant. In such a situation, (1) says that an unspecified number of children entered the garden. When (1) has the former interpretation, *some* is stressed; when it has the latter interpretation it is unstressed and reduced (*sm*).

(1) Some children entered the garden

* We would like to thank Angelika Kratzer and Barbara Partee for their invaluable comments and suggestions. Previous versions of this work were presented at the Proseminar on Existential Sentences held at UMass in the Spring of 2002. We are very grateful to the participants in that seminar for most useful discussions. Thanks also to Javier Gutiérrez-Rexach who kindly sent us his 2001 paper. It goes without saying that all errors are ours.

2. Two Approaches

Two ways of accounting for the behavior of weak determiners have been proposed. On the one hand, what we will call the Ambiguity Approach (Partee 1989, Diesing 1992, de Hoop 1992) maintains that weak determiners are ambiguous between a presuppositional reading and a non-presuppositional one. On the other hand, Büring (1996) proposes that weak determiners are not ambiguous: whether they are presuppositional or not depends on the topic/focus articulation of the sentence. We will dub this proposal the Pragmatic Approach. In what follows, we summarize the main ideas of each of these approaches.

2.1. The Ambiguity Approach

According to the Ambiguity Approach, the two readings of weak determiners are encoded in the lexicon. Every weak determiner is associated with two lexical entries. On one reading, weak determiners are predicate modifiers. They give information about the cardinality of the set denoted by the NP with which they combine. On the other reading, weak determiners are quantifiers, and they presuppose that the set denoted by the NP with which they combine is not empty.

2.2. The Pragmatic Approach

The Pragmatic Approach put forward by Büring (1996) maintains that it is not necessary to postulate a semantic ambiguity to explain the behavior of weak determiners. The presuppositional reading comes about as a result of topic/focus marking. How this is done is illustrated below.

The sentence in (3a), with narrow focus on the object¹, is adequate as an answer to the question *What did John eat?* In the Hamblin/Karttunen tradition (Hamblin, 1973; Karttunen, 1979) a question denotes a set of propositions (the set of its possible answers). For instance, the question *What did John eat?* denotes the set of all propositions expressed by sentences of the form 'John ate x', as illustrated in (3b). A declarative sentence can be understood as an answer to an implicit question. From now on, we will refer to this implicit question as a context.

- (3) a. John ate COOKIES
b. {[[*John ate cookies*]], [[*John ate apples*]], [[*John ate bananas*]]...}.

The sentence in (4), with a so-called contrastive topic accent on the subject and narrow focus on the object differs from (3a) in that it triggers the reconstruction of a particular set of potential contexts, the ones we obtain by substituting *John* for its contextually relevant alternatives. Some possible contexts for (4) are listed in (5a)-(5c).

¹ In the examples that follow, we stick to the tradition of using capital letters to mark a pitch accent.

- (4) JOHN ate COOKIES
- (5) (a) [[*What did the boys eat?*]] (= {[[*The boys ate cookies*]], [[*The boys ate apples*]] ...})
 (b) [[*What did Bill eat?*]] (= {[[*Bill ate cookies*]], [[*Bill ate apples*]] ...})
 (c) [[*What did Mary and John eat?*]] (= {[[*Mary and John ate cookies*]], [[*Mary and John ate apples*]] ...})
 ...

Sentence (6) has the intonational structure that corresponds to the presuppositional reading of *some*. The only difference between (6) and (4) is that, in (6), the DP in subject position contains a determiner. A set of potential contexts for (6) is given in (7).

- (6) SOME cowboys ate COOKIES
- (7) (a) What did the cowboys eat?
 (b) What did all cowboys eat?
 (c) What did most cowboys eat?
 (d) What did many cowboys eat?
 ...

What these contexts have in common is that they presuppose the existence of a group of cowboys. Therefore, the presuppositional reading emerges as a result of the contexts that the sentence requires. The sentence will be felicitous only in situations where there is a contextually relevant group of cowboys.

The Pragmatic Approach is simpler than the Ambiguity Approach because it reduces the adduced ambiguity to pragmatic principles that are independently needed.

3. Both Approaches are Needed: the Spanish Case

The Ambiguity Approach has it that a weak determiner is associated with two lexical entries. On the other hand, the Pragmatic Approach claims that the presuppositional reading arises as a result of some explicit topic and/or focus marking. We argue here that both approaches are needed. We present as evidence the behavior of two plural Spanish determiners, which roughly correspond to English *some*: *unos* and *algunos*. *Unos* exhibits the behavior predicted by the Pragmatic Approach. As we will show, it can be presuppositional, but only as a result of some sort of topic marking. *Algunos* works as predicted by the Ambiguity Approach: it can be either presuppositional or non-presuppositional and which reading we get does not depend on the topic/focus articulation of the sentence.

3.1. *Unos* and *Algunos*: Presuppositionality

Both *unos* and *algunos* are possible in existential sentences, as shown in (8) and (9). Thus, they are both weak in Milsark's (1974, 1977) sense.

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|-----|-----------|----------------|--------|----|-----|-------|
| (8) | Hay | <i>algunos</i> | libros | en | la | mesa |
| (9) | Hay | <i>unos</i> | libros | en | la | mesa |
| | There are | some | books | on | the | table |

While the sentence in (10) just says that an unspecified number of boys are painting, (11) can have a partitive, presuppositional reading, which can be paraphrased as 'some of the boys are painting'. *Unos*, hence, patterns with unstressed *sm* in English; *algunos*, with stressed *some*.

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|------|----------------|--------|-------|----------|
| (10) | <i>Unos</i> | chicos | están | pintando |
| | Some | boys | are | painting |
| (11) | <i>Algunos</i> | chicos | están | pintando |
| | Some | boys | are | painting |

It is possible for *unos* NP to amount to all the Ns there are in the context of utterance. That, however, is not the case for *algunos* NP. Imagine a picture in which there are three boys, all of them painting. Suppose we ask someone to describe the picture. While (10) would be a perfectly acceptable description, (11) would be odd.

Partitive, presuppositional determiners give rise to generalized conversational scalar implicatures. Assuming that the speaker uttering (12a) is being cooperative (and, hence, making the most informative claim that she can) from the sentence in (12a) we can infer that (12b) is not true. Since this inference is an implicature it can be cancelled without contradiction, as shown by (12c).

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|------|-----|---|
| (12) | (a) | Most people left |
| | (b) | Everybody left |
| | (c) | Most people left; in fact everybody left. |

Algunos triggers scalar implicatures; *unos* does not. In (11), *algunos* licenses the scalar implicature that not all boys are painting. The sentence in (14) shows that the implicature can be cancelled. In (10), *unos* does not trigger any scalar implicature. Trying to cancel a non existing implicature results in a deviant discourse, as (13) illustrates.

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|------|----------------|--------|-------|-----------|---------|-------|
| (13) | <i>Unos</i> | chicos | están | pintando. | #Bueno, | todos |
| | Some | boys | are | painting. | Well, | all |
| (14) | <i>Algunos</i> | chicos | están | pintando. | Bueno, | todos |
| | Some | boys | are | painting. | Well, | all |

Certain uses of negation ('external', 'metalinguistic' (Horn, 1985)) can target conversational implicatures. A speaker can use (15a), for instance, to deny the implicature that John did not take all the books, as the continuation in (15b) makes explicit.

- (15) (a) John did not take MOST books...
 (b) ...he took ALL of them

These uses are possible with *algunos*, but not with *unos*, as (16) and (17) illustrate.

- (16) No hay *algunos* libros en la mesa, hay muchos
 Not there are some books on the table, there are many
 'There are not SOME books on the table, there are many'

- (17) #No hay *unos* libros en la mesa, hay muchos
 Not there are some books on the table, there are many
 'There are not SOME books on the table, there are many'

Up until this point we have shown that *algunos* has a presuppositional reading that *unos* lacks. Is *algunos* always presuppositional? No, it can also have a non-presuppositional interpretation. For instance, the sentence in (18) can be used in a situation in which there is no salient group of boys.

- (18) Miré por la ventana y *algunos* niños jugaban a la pelota
 'I looked through the window and some boys were playing soccer'

3.1.2. *Unos* and Individual-Level Predicates.

Milsark (1977) shows that unstressed *some* is incompatible with i-level predicates while stressed *some* is fine with them:

- (19) Some men are intelligent

- (20) #sm men are intelligent

This generalization has been explained by Ladusaw (1994) in the following terms: i-level predicates presuppose the existence of the entity denoted by their subjects. A quantificational statement can be understood as making multiple predications. Therefore, only quantifiers whose restrictions are presupposed to be non-empty will be able to be the subject of an i-level predicate.

As expected, *unos* is incompatible with i-level predicates and *algunos* is fine with

them, as first noted by Villalta (1992).

- (21) a. #*Unos* estudiantes son inteligentes
 b. *Algunos* estudiantes son inteligentes
 Some students are intelligent

3.2. *Unos* Can be Presuppositional if Topic/Focus Marked.

As noted by Villalta (1992) and Gutiérrez-Rexach (1999, 2001), when interpreted contrastively, *unos* is compatible with individual-level predicates. This is illustrated by the example in (22).

- (22) *Unos* estudiantes son inteligentes, *otros* vagos
 Some students are intelligent, others lazy
 ‘Some of the students are intelligent; others are lazy’

The presuppositional use of *unos* is not limited to cases like (22). *Unos* is interpreted presuppositionally (and hence compatible with i-level predicates) at least in the following two situations²:

- (i) When the sentence has a continuative intonation that marks “elusive” answers of the type associated with contrastive topic in Büring’s work³. This is illustrated by the sentence in (23b), which constitutes a partial answer to the question in (23a).
- (23) (a) ¿Qué piensas de tus estudiantes?
 ‘What do you think about your students?’
 (b) Bueno, *unos* son inteligentes...
 Well, some are intelligent...

² As a reviewer noted, sentences like (i) can be made grammatical if we add *cuantos*, as in (ii), which when used in questions is translated as *how many* (witness (iii)). One way to look at these facts would be to assume that *unos...cuantos* is a different determiner, as suggested by Barbara Partee (p.c.). An alternative would be to try to derive the meaning of *unos...cuantos* compositionally. This is an issue that we leave for further research.

- (i) #*Unos* estudiantes son inteligentes
 Some students are intelligent
(ii) *Unos* *cuantos* estudiantes son inteligentes
 ‘Some students are intelligent’
(iii) ¿*Cuántos* estudiantes vinieron?
 How many students came?

³ Topic/focus marking is not always expressed in Spanish by means of intonational prominence. We refer the reader to Zubizarreta 1998 and Casielles-Suárez 1997 for an overview of the complexities of the topic.

(ii) When *unos* is focused, as in the most salient reading in (24), where *unos niños* is under the scope of *sólo* ('only').

(24) *Sólo unos niños son inteligentes*
'Only some boys are intelligent'

From the examples in (22) to (24) we can conclude that *unos* is able to get the presuppositional reading when forced to by the topic/focus marking. Thus, it behaves exactly as the Pragmatic Approach predicts a weak determiner should: *algunos*, on the other hand, can get a presuppositional interpretation with no 'external help', as the Ambiguity Approach predicts. We take this as evidence that both approaches are needed.

4. An Alternative View?

We have claimed that *algunos* is semantically ambiguous between a presuppositional and a non-presuppositional reading whereas *unos* is semantically non-presuppositional, but can behave presuppositionally if contrastive. This suggests that both the Ambiguity Approach and the Pragmatic Approach are needed. As a reviewer pointed out, this conclusion is not very elegant. In fact, the appeal of Büring's theory lies in that it does not posit an ambiguity for weak determiners but rather accounts for their behavior by means of independently needed mechanisms. So by proposing that we need *both* Büring's theory and the Ambiguity Theory we are undermining Büring's approach. Do the facts really force us to make that move? Actually, some of the data presented in the first part of the paper could be used to construct an argument against it.

Let us go back to (8) and (9), where both *unos* and *algunos* are possible and there is no presupposition involved.

(8) Hay *algunos* libros en la mesa
(9) Hay *unos* libros en la mesa
'There are some books on the table'

If *unos* and *algunos* differ only in the circumstances in which they can be presuppositional, then, we might expect them to be interchangeable in a context (such as existential constructions) where both are necessarily not presuppositional. However, the prediction is not borne out. Even in existential sentences, *algunos* triggers scalar implicatures but *unos* does not, as examples (13)-(14) and (16)-(17), repeated here as (25) to (28), illustrate.

(25) Hay unos libros en la mesa. #Bueno, muchos
'There are some books on the table, well, many'

(26) Hay algunos libros en la mesa. Bueno, muchos.
'There are some books on the table, well many'

- (27) No hay algunos libros en la mesa, hay muchos
 Not there are some books on the table, there are many
 There are not SOME books on the table, there are many’
- (28) #No hay unos libros en la mesa, hay muchos
 Not there are some books on the table, there are many
 ‘There are not SOME books on the table, there are many’

A reviewer suggested that these facts could be accounted for by a proposal along the following lines: both determiners make the same set-theoretical contribution (the intersection of the set denoted by the NP and the set denoted by the VP is not empty) but while *algunos* focuses on the amount, *unos* focuses on the class or identity of the individuals involved. *Algunos* contrasts with the Spanish version of *few*, *many*, *most*, *every*, and therefore triggers scalar implicatures. The presuppositional reading would be a by-product of these implicatures. On the other hand, *unos* does not participate in the same scale, but rather it contrasts with *otros* (‘others’). This contrast is made especially salient when *unos* is focused. Since *unos* and *otros* do not form an ordered scale, the non-focused use of *unos* does not usually trigger scalar implicatures and hence, presuppositionality does not arise.

A more radical approach would be to assume that what distinguishes *algunos* from *unos* is that they belong to different semantic categories. Here is a suggestion: *algunos* is a quantifier (and as such, it participates in scales and triggers scalar implicatures); *unos* is not. One possibility would be to say that *unos* introduces a new discourse referent, a plural individual. Hence, a sentence like (29) below is saying that a plural individual belonging to the set of boys is playing soccer. The issue of how many boys are playing does not arise. Recall that (29) could be used to describe a situation where all the boys are playing soccer but it would also be a good description of a situation where two boys out of five are playing soccer, or of a situation where four boys out of five are playing soccer. So (29) does not license the inference that not all/not many boys are playing soccer.

- (29) Unos niños están jugando al fútbol
 Some niños are playing soccer

As it stands, it is unclear to us what this proposal would have to say about the behavior of *unos* with i-level predicates. Why would *unos* be incompatible with i-level predicates in the absence of topic/focus marking? Working out the idea sketched above to a point where we can really test its implications is the next step in our project.

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