

## Some Epistemic Indefinites\*

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### 1. Epistemic Indefinites.

Across languages, we find indefinites that overtly mark a speaker's lack of knowledge: they signal that the speaker is unable to give any further information about who or what satisfies her existential claim (Becker, 1999; Haspelmath, 1997). From now on, we will refer to the marking of the speaker's lack of knowledge as an *epistemic effect* and to the indefinites that induce epistemic effects as *epistemic indefinites*.

English *some* followed by a singular count noun belongs to that category. By using *some* in (1), A conveys that she is unable to identify the cabinet minister. As a result, B's question is pragmatically odd. This contrasts with the dialogue in (2), where A uses the 'non-marked' indefinite *a* and B's question feels appropriate.

- (1) A: Some cabinet minister has been shot. (Strawson, 1974)  
B: # Who?
- (2) A: A cabinet minister has been shot.  
B: Who?

The examples in (3) and (4) show that the same contrast obtains in Spanish. A's use of the indefinite *algún* in (3) renders B's question inappropriate. In (4), on the other hand, it is perfectly acceptable to ask for further clarification after A's utterance, in which the indefinite *un* is used.

- (3) A: María está tomando **alguna** clase de lingüística.  
Mary is taking some-UI class of Linguistics

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B: #¿Cuál?  
Which one?

(4) A: María está tomando **una** clase de lingüística.  
Mary is taking some class of Linguistics

B: ¿Cuál?  
Which one?

Judging from these data, one could imagine that epistemic indefinites are uniformly characterized by the same epistemic effects. However, despite their superficial similarity, the epistemic effect of *some* and that of *algún* differ: while both (5) and (6) indicate that the speaker is unable to provide the identity of the man that María is dating, they are not appropriate in the same scenarios. By uttering (5) the speaker signals that, as far as she knows, María might be dating any of the men in the Linguistics Department (we will dub the type of epistemic effect that *algún* induces a free choice epistemic effect). In contrast, a speaker can utter (6) even when she knows that there are some men in the Linguistics department that Mary cannot possibly be dating.

(5) María está saliendo con **algún** chico del departamento de lingüística.  
Mary is going out with some-UI guy of the department of Linguistics

(6) Mary is dating some guy from the Linguistics Department.

In this paper we will show that the epistemic effect of *algún* can be derived in the same way Kratzer and Shimoyama (2002) derive the interaction of German *irgendein* with modals. Crucially, we will assume that *algún* widens its domain and that assertions are implicitly modalized. Although we will not give a complete account of the epistemic effect of *some*, we would like to suggest that in order to do so it would be necessary to pay attention to the different ways we can have discriminating knowledge about individuals (even though *some* expresses ignorance, it can be used when making a claim about an individual with which the speaker has direct perceptual acquaintance.)

## 2. The Free Choice Epistemic Effect of *Algún*.

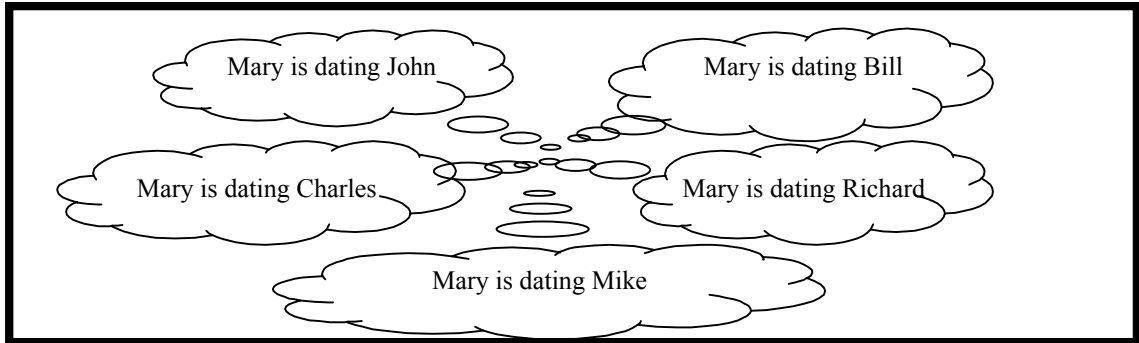
In order to see what we mean by free-choice epistemic effect, it may be useful to take a look at the following two scenarios:

### *Scenario 1*

There are five male linguists in the department: John, Bill, Charles, Richard and Mike. I have heard, from a trustworthy source, that María is dating one of them. But that is all I know; I have no idea which of them she is dating.

My epistemic alternatives in Scenario 1 are depicted in Figure 1:

Fig. 1: My relevant epistemic alternatives in Scenario 1.



*Scenario 2*

There are five male linguists in the department: John, Bill, Charles, Richard and Mike. I have heard, from a trustworthy source, that María is dating a linguist in the department. I know she is not dating Mike, I know she is not dating Richard, and I know she is not dating Charles. So, according to what I know, María can be dating John or she can be dating Bill.

My epistemic alternatives in Scenario 2 look as in Figure 2:

Fig. 2: My relevant epistemic alternatives in Scenario 2.



The sentence in (5) (repeated below as (7)) can felicitously describe Scenario 1, but not Scenario 2.

- (7) María está saliendo con **algún** chico del departamento de lingüística.  
 Mary is going out with some-UI guy of the department of Linguistics

By using *algún* the speaker signals that, as far as she knows, the linguist that María is dating might be any of the five men in the domain. In other words, for each x in the domain, there has to be an epistemic alternative w such that the proposition that Mary is dating x is true in w. This is the free-choice epistemic effect.<sup>1</sup>

As for *some*, speakers vary. Some of our consultants consider (8) below to be good in both scenarios.

- (8) Mary is dating some linguist in the department.

<sup>1</sup> One can read Lenz's (1944) grammar as hinting at this kind of effect.

Other speakers find (8) inadequate, probably because the scenarios make very plausible that the speaker is familiar with the linguists in question. This points to a further difference between *some* and *algún*, which we hope to be able to discuss in future work.<sup>2</sup>

So far, we have shown that *algún* exhibits a free-choice epistemic effect. The examples in the next section show that the epistemic effect of *some* is not a free-choice one: *some* can be used in scenarios where the indefinite is understood to concern a particular individual.

### 3. The Non-Free Choice Epistemic Effect of *Some*.

*Some* can have a referential use. Consider, for instance, the following scenario:

*Scenario 3.*

L and P are talking in the lounge of the Math department, on one of those long, boring, predictable winter evenings when everybody is doing what they are supposed to. Neither L nor P knows anybody there. All of a sudden, a burst of Brazilian music starts to play in an office. Believe it or not, there is a guy dancing lambada on his desk. Unbeknownst to L and P, the guy is Rino Cusper, the famous statistician.

In that scenario, P can utter (9) felicitously.

(9) Look! Some professor is dancing lambada on his table.

On the other hand, the Spanish sentence in (10) is bad in the scenario above.

(10) #¡Mira! **algún** profesor está bailando la lambada encima de la mesa.  
Look! some-UI professor is dancing lambada on the table

*Algún* is incompatible with scenario 3 because it is not the case that, as far as P knows, any professor in the relevant domain could be the one dancing lambada. P is actually seeing the professor in front of her. It is true that she can't name him — she can't say that Rino Cusper is dancing lambada. (That is exactly what she is signaling by using *some* in (9)). What she does know, however, is that *that guy over there* is dancing lambada: Were

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<sup>2</sup> Judgments improve in the following scenario, where the speaker is not likely to be acquainted in any way with the individuals in the relevant domain.

Yesterday, I clearly saw a guy with a long beard trying to get into my car. The police have identified five men as suspects and asked me to identify them. I could look at them all through a one-way glass. Three of them, (suspects a, b, and c) didn't have beards and I am pretty sure none of them was the man I saw at the parking lot. But I was startled: the remaining two (suspects d and e) wore long beards. I am pretty sure that either d or e tried to get into my car.

While most of the speakers we consulted found (i) appropriate in that scenario, there were a couple of exceptions. Barbara Partee (p.c.) suggests that *some* may not like to select from such a small closed set.

(i) Some man in that room tried to get into my car.

she presented with all the professors in the Math department and asked who the one dancing lambada was, she would be able to pick Rino Cusper among them. Hence, the use of *algún*, which requires that all members in the domain are possible options, would be inappropriate.

Now consider a slight modification in the scenario:

*Scenario 3 Modified.*

Strange things happen! L and P are outside the office where a faculty meeting is being held. Suddenly, they hear lambada music coming out of the office and sounds that unequivocally indicate that a person is dancing to the music.

Now P can utter the sentence in (10) quite appropriately. As far as she knows, any professor (in that room) could be the one dancing lambada.

The epistemic effect induced by *some* is not a free-choice one. The *some*-sentence in (9) can be used to describe Scenario 3 in which it is not true that as far as the speaker knows, any professor might be dancing lambada.

#### 4. How to Derive the Epistemic Effect of *Algún*: Kratzer and Shimoyama (2002)

Kratzer and Shimoyama derive the behavior of the German indefinite *irgendein* in interaction with modals from the assumption that *irgendein* imposes domain widening. They suggest in passing that their analysis should carry over to the epistemic uses of *irgendein*. In this section, we will go through their proposal and show how it accounts for the epistemic effect induced by *algún*.

##### 4.1 Indefinites in Kratzer and Shimoyama's System.

Kratzer and Shimoyama propose that indefinite DPs denote the set of contextually relevant individuals that satisfy the extension of the NP. Thus, the denotation of *a girl* will be the set of girls in a contextually given domain.

- (11) a. Let  $D$  be a variable ranging over sets of individuals,  
 $[[a_D \text{ girl}]]^{w,g} = \{x: x \text{ is a girl in } w \ \& \ x \text{ is in } g(D)\}$   
 b. Illustration: Let  $g(D) = \{x: \text{I had dinner with } x \text{ last night}\} = \{\text{Leonor Waitling, Michelle Pfeiffer, Cary Grant}\}$ ,  
 $[[a_D \text{ girl}]]^{w,g} = \{\text{Leonor Waitling, Michelle Pfeiffer}\}$

In Kratzer and Shimoyama's Hamblin semantics, we get a set of propositional alternatives by combining indefinites with predicates. Indefinites denote sets of individuals. Predicates denote functions from individuals to propositions.<sup>3</sup> Indefinites combine with predicates by pointwise functional application, as illustrated below:

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<sup>3</sup> In Kratzer and Shimoyama's system, denotations are uniformly sets. The denotation of a predicate is not a function from individuals to propositions, but rather a singleton containing it. The denotation of a sentence

- (12) a. A girl<sub>D</sub> came to the party  
 b. Let  $g(D) = \{\text{Leonor Waitling, Michelle Pfeiffer}\}$   
 $[[\text{came to the party}]]^{w,g} ([[a_D \text{ girl}]]^{w,g}) =$   
 $\Box x \Box w'. x \text{ came to the party in } w' (\{\text{Leonor Waitling, Michelle Pfeiffer}\}) =$   
 $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \Box w'. \text{ Leonor Waitling came to the party in } w', \\ \Box w'. \text{ Michelle Pfeiffer came to the party in } w' \end{array} \right\}$

Kratzer and Shimoyama let modals operate on sets of propositions<sup>4</sup>. A sentence containing a necessity modal is true if and only if for each accessible world  $w$ , there is at least one proposition in the set the modal operates over that is true in  $w$ .

As an illustration, consider what happens if we embed the sentence in (12a) under *Mary knows*, as in (13). Let us assume that *know* is an epistemic necessity modal. The modal takes a set containing two propositions: the proposition that Leonor came to the party and the proposition that Michelle came to the party. The sentence in (13) will be true iff for every epistemic alternative of Mary  $w$ , Leonor came to the party in  $w$  or Michelle came to the party in  $w$  (or both Leonor and Michelle came to the party in  $w$ .)

- (13) Mary knows that a girl<sub>D</sub> came to the party.

#### 4.2 Kratzer and Shimoyama's Analysis of *Irgendein*.

According to Kratzer and Shimoyama, *irgendein* induces domain widening. The semantics of *irgendein* looks as in (14), following Chierchia (2001): *Irgendein Mann* denotes the set of all men in the world of evaluation.

- (14)  $[[\text{irgendein}_D \text{ Mann}]]^{w,g} = \{x: \Box g' [x \text{ is a man} \ \& \ x \in g'(D)]\} = \{x: x \text{ is a man in } w\}$

Each time we combine a domain widening element like *irgendein* with a predicate, we get a maximal set of alternatives:

- (15) Mary knows that *irgendein*<sub>D</sub> girl came to the party.

$$[[\text{Mary knows}]]^{w,g} \left( \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \Box w'. \text{ Leonor Waitling came to the party in } w', \\ \Box w'. \text{ Michelle Pfeiffer came to the party in } w', \\ \Box w'. \text{ Ariadna Gil came to the party in } w', \\ \Box w'. \text{ Sandy came to the party in } w', \\ \dots \text{ for all the girls in } w. \end{array} \right\} \right)$$

The semantics of the modal tells us that the sentence in (15) is true iff for every epistemic alternative of Mary  $w$ , at least one of the girls in the domain came to the party in  $w$ .

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is not a proposition, but a singleton containing a proposition. For the sake of simplicity, we will ignore this point here.

<sup>4</sup> Aloni (2002) makes the same move.

According to this, (15) can be true in scenarios where there are girls that do not constitute an epistemic possibility for Mary. The sentence in (15) would be true, for instance, in a situation in which Mary knows that Sandy came to the party (represented in (16a)) or in a situation in which, as far as Mary knows, either Sandy or Leonor might have come to the party (represented in (16b)).

- (16) a.  $w_1$  Sandy came to the party    b.  $w_1$  Sandy came to the party  
 $w_2$  Sandy came to the party     $w_2$  Leonor came to the party  
 $w_3$  Sandy came to the party     $w_3$  Sandy came to the party  
 $w_4$  Sandy came to the party     $w_4$  Leonor came to the party

As it turns out, the sentence in (15) cannot appropriately describe the scenarios in (16). In order for it to be felicitous, each of the propositions in the set operated over by the modal has to be true in at least one of Mary's epistemic alternatives. Kratzer and Shimoyama dub this effect the 'distribution requirement' and propose that it comes about as an inference drawn by the hearer on the basis of the domain widening induced by *irgendein*.

Building on Kadmon and Landman (1993), Kratzer and Shimoyama assume that domain widening must serve a purpose. In the case of 'pure' existentials like *irgendein*, domain widening may be due to two reasons: avoiding a false claim and avoiding false exhaustivity inferences.

To see what exhaustivity inferences are, consider the following dialogue:

- (17) A: Which tube stations are one stop from Oxford Circus?  
 B: Piccadilly Circus, Bond Street, Tottenham Court Road, Green Park, Warren Street, Regent's Park are each one stop from Oxford Circus (Zimmerman, 2000).

A will normally take B's response to be exhaustive. That is, A will draw the (exhaustivity) inference<sup>5</sup> that the only underground stations that are one stop from Oxford Circus are the ones mentioned in B's answer (Groenendijk and Stokhof, 1984).

Let us go back to example (15). For the sake of illustration, let us assume that there are only two girls in our world: Renée and Sandy. If these are all the girls in the world, then the set the modal operates on contains just two propositions, as shown below.

- (18)  $[[Mary\ knows]]^{w,g} \left( \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \Box w'. \text{ Renée came to the party in } w', \\ \Box w'. \text{ Sandy came to the party in } w' \end{array} \right\} \right)$

The speaker could have made a claim about a smaller domain, say one containing just Renée. Why didn't she do so?

<sup>5</sup> Kratzer and Shimoyama stay agnostic with respect to whether these inferences are implicatures or implications.

One possible reason is that the speaker is trying to avoid making a false claim. The hearer may reason as follows: the speaker did not make a claim about a domain containing only Renée. It must be because it is not true Mary knows that Renée came to the party. Following that same line of reasoning, the hearer will conclude that, if the speaker did not make a claim about a domain containing just Sandy it must be because it is not true that Mary knows that Sandy came to the party. If we put these inferences together with the truth conditional content of the sentence, then we will only allow for models in which all the girls are epistemic possibilities and none of them is a necessity. Hence, we rule out models like the ones in (16), as desired.

The other possible reason is that the speaker is trying to avoid a false exhaustivity inference. Suppose Mary knows that Renée came to the party. Then the speaker could have made a claim about the domain containing just Renée. But if she had done so, the hearer would have been entitled to infer that it is not true that Mary knows that Sandy came to the party. By widening the domain, the speaker blocks this exhaustivity inference. She is signaling that if Mary knows that Renée came, then Mary knows that Sandy came. Applying the same reasoning to the domain containing just Sandy, the hearer can conclude that if Mary knows that Sandy came, then she also knows that Renée did. So the hearer is entitled to conclude that Mary knows that Renée came if and only if she knows that Sandy did. Now we rule out models like the ones in (16) (but still allow for models in which all propositional alternatives are necessities.)

Let us now see how we can characterize the free choice epistemic effect of *algún* by appealing to these inferences.

### 4.3 *Algún.*

Recall that the example in (5) (repeated below as (19)) conveys that, as far as the speaker knows, Mary might be dating any of the individuals in the domain. This free choice epistemic effect can be derived by Kratzer and Shimoyama's proposal.

- (19) María está saliendo con **algún** chico del departamento de lingüística.  
Mary is going out with some-UI guy of the department of linguistics

We will assume that *algún*, like *irgendein*, widens the domain, as illustrated in (14) above. The epistemic effect of *algún* comes about as a result of the interaction of epistemic modality with the domain widening that *algún* induces. In the example in (15), there is an overt modal element. But where is the epistemic modality coming from in examples like (19)?

We will assume that assertions are implicitly modalized. For the sake of illustration, we will capture that by means of an assertoric operator.<sup>6</sup> Very roughly, the sentence in (20a) can be given the truth conditions in (20b).

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the intricacies of the topic, see Williamson (1996). The modal component does not seem to be cancelable, as shown by the following illustrations of Moore's paradox:



- (20) a. The cat is on the mat  
 b.  $[[\text{ASSERT}]]^{w,g} ([[the\ cat\ is\ on\ the\ mat]]^{w,g}) (w_0) = 1$  iff for all the speaker's epistemic alternatives  $w'$ , there is at least one proposition in  $\{\Box w'. \text{the cat is on the mat in } w'\}$  that is true in  $w'$ .

With that assumption in place<sup>7</sup>, the epistemic effect of *algún* in (19) can be derived by appealing to the inferences triggered by domain widening. Again, let us assume that the relevant set of men contains just two elements: Mike and Charles. *Algún* triggers a maximal set of propositional alternatives:

- (21)  $[[\text{ASSERT}]]^{w,g} (\{\Box w'. \text{Mary is dating Mike in } w', \Box w'. \text{Mary is dating Charles in } w'\})$

The speaker could have made a claim about a smaller domain, say one containing just Mike. As noted above, there are two possible reasons why she didn't do so.

The hearer can reason that the speaker was trying to avoid a false claim. Then, she will conclude that, as far as the speaker knows, none of the propositions in the set is a necessity: the speaker doesn't know that Mary is dating Mike and she doesn't know that Mary is dating Charles, either. Since each of the propositions in the set operated over by the modal has to be true at least in one of the speaker's epistemic alternatives, then we get that as far as the speaker knows, Mary might be dating Mike and she might be dating Charles. This is just the epistemic effect we want.

By assuming that the speaker is trying to avoid a false exhaustivity inference, we will rule out models where the speaker knows that Mary is dating only Charles and models where the speaker knows that Mary is dating only Mike. But we will allow for models where the speaker knows that Mary is dating both Charles and Mike. However, the sentence in (19) is infelicitous in those models.

It is possible that anti-exhaustivity is not at work in the *algún* examples. Or maybe both inferences are computed and models where Mary is dating all the men in the domain are ruled out by an additional factor. A possibility that comes to mind is that the singular number of *algún* is associated with a uniqueness presupposition. But that does not seem to be the case, given that the sentence in (22) below can felicitously describe situations where two or more authors discuss Spanish indefinites (cf. Alarcos Llorach 1994).

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- (i) a. #The cat is on the mat, but I don't believe it.  
 b. #Dogs bark, but I don't know that they do. (Moore, 1962)

<sup>7</sup> This is just a working assumption, which may need to be qualified: while some speakers accept sentences like (19) without any hesitation, some others require an explicit modal expression, as in (ii). It seems that some speakers can recover the implicit modalization more easily than others, which is unexpected if what contributes the epistemic modality is a *default* assertoric operator.

- (ii) Creo /Probablemente / Sé/ Parece que María está saliendo con **algún** lingüista del departamento  
 I believe/Probably/I know/It seems that María is going out with some-UI linguist of the department

- (22) **Algún** autor finlandés habla de los indefinidos en español  
 Some-UI author Finish talks about the indefinites in Spanish

The sentence in (22), however, is inappropriate in scenarios where all the authors discuss Spanish indefinites. This is due to the fact that *algún* participates in a scale with *todos* ('all'), *muchos* ('many') and *pocos* ('few'), and hence triggers scalar implicatures. Thus, the sentence in (19) implicates that the speaker knows that Mary is not dating all the men in the domain. This rules out the undesired models.

## 5. Some Observations about *Some*.

In section 3 we showed that the epistemic effect of *some* is different from that of *algún*. How can we characterize the epistemic effect of *some*? In this section, we would like to raise some issues that might help to get us closer to an answer to that question.

As a first approximation, one can say that *some* signals lack of knowledge. We could take von Fintel's formulation (for the ignorance reading of *whatever*) as a starting point (Fintel, 2000). In a class handout, Von Fintel suggests in passing that *some* might be amenable to such an analysis:

- (23) Some R is P is defined only if  
 $\Box_{w', w''} \Box_p \{x: R(w')(x) \ \& \ P(w')(x)\} \neq \{x: R(w'')(x) \ \& \ P(w'')(x)\}$   
 (where p stands for the set of epistemic alternatives of the speaker)

On this proposal, the sentence in (24) can be uttered felicitously, in a scenario when one girl called, only if among the speaker's epistemic alternatives, there are at least two worlds  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  such that the person who called in  $w_1$  is not the same person who called in  $w_2$ .

- (24) Some girl called.

This captures the intuition that *some* conveys that the speaker does not know which girl called. But this isn't enough. Consider again our example (9) (repeated below as (25)):

- (25) P: Look! Some professor is dancing lambada on his table.

Recall that P uttered that sentence while pointing at the man dancing lambada in front of her. So in all of P's epistemic alternatives the individual satisfying the existential claim is the same, namely, the individual in front of her. Puzzlingly, *some* is still appropriate in that scenario. How come *some* can convey ignorance and be referential at the same time?

In order to account for the epistemic use of *some*, it might be necessary to pay attention to different types of individuation. As Evans (1982) notes, descriptions can be used referentially in two different ways, depending on whether they are used as names or a demonstratives. The following two examples, from Ludlow and Neale (1991) illustrate those two uses.

(A) *Description used as a name.*

“Suppose we notice Jones, whom we both know to be a convicted embezzler, lurking around at a function we are attending. Seeing Jones flirting with your sister, I say to you” (Ludlow and Neale 1991: 528)

(26) A convicted embezzler is flirting with your sister.

When uttering (26), the speaker is trying to convey the information that Jones is flirting with your sister.<sup>8</sup>

(B) *Description used as a demonstrative*

“Suppose we are sitting by a window overlooking your garden. I look out the window and I see a man uprooting your prize turnips. I utter” (Ludlow and Neale 1991: 529)

(27) Look! A man is uprooting your turnips

In this case, the speaker intends to communicate that the man over there is uprooting your turnips.

In both (A) and (B), the speaker is acquainted with the person that satisfies her existential claim. However, she is acquainted with that person in different ways. In (A), she has had some epistemic contact with Jones before; in (B), the individual at issue is in her perceptual field. Replacing *a* with *some* renders the sentence inappropriate in the first scenario but not in the second. We take this to suggest that the use of *some* is sensitive to the different ways we may have discriminating knowledge of individuals.<sup>9</sup> Making this more precise is a task we leave for further research.

## 6. Summary.

Both English *some* and Spanish *algún* convey an epistemic effect: they signal that the speaker is unable to provide any further information about who or what satisfies the existential claim she is making. However, the epistemic effects they induce are different. *Algún* indicates that, as far as the speaker knows, any individual in the relevant domain may be the one satisfying the existential claim. That is not the case for *some*, which can be given a referential use.

The epistemic effect conveyed by *algún* can be accounted by Kratzer and Shimoyama's (2002) proposal. As for *some*, it is not enough to say that it expresses ignorance on the part of the speaker. We have suggested that the use of *some* might be sensitive to the

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<sup>8</sup> Ludlow and Neale (1991) consider that this is not part of the truth-conditional content of the sentence, but rather a pragmatic inference.

<sup>9</sup> As Barbara Partee (p.c), this mixture of ignorance and reference is also conveyed in questions like *Who is that man drinking martini over there?* (Donnellan, 1966).

different ways we can be acquainted with individuals. We hope to be able to explore this possibility in future research.

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