

On contrastive readings in the interpretation of NPs/DPs

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1. Introduction

This paper aims at putting together a series of facts – all of them pertaining to the domain of DP interpretation- that have, to my knowledge, never been connected before, and seem to point towards a significant generalization on the role of contrast. Such facts involve different kinds of expressions, from bare plurals, indefinite DPs and interrogatives to strong pronouns and definite descriptions. In a nutshell, the idea I would like to put forward is the following one. None of the expression types I just mentioned is inherently contrastive in their basic semantics. However, their use in certain environments is typically associated with a contrastive reading. It seems, thus, that contrast appears as a pragmatic effect triggered by the interaction between the linguistic meaning of the nominal expression and certain features of the context: more precisely, my claim is that contrast operates as a last resort interpretive mechanism that is able to “rescue” a nominal placed in a “hostile” environment, i.e. an environment where the nominal does not fit in adequately for some reason. Contrast is thus triggered as an inferential solution for some interpretive mismatches. It is convenient to make clear from the beginning that, instead of dealing with constructions that encode contrast, I intend to concentrate on constructions where contrast is pragmatically inferred as a component of the interpretation assigned to a DP. The central feature of my account lies in taking advantage of an adequate division of labor between the grammatical system (syntax and semantics) and the cognitive principles that are responsible for our inferential abilities (pragmatics). Most of the data I will discuss will come from Spanish and other Romance languages.

An analysis of this cluster of phenomena should ideally shed some light both on the semantics / pragmatics interface in the interpretation of NPs / DPs, and on the nature of contrast and related notions like D-linking and Contrastive Topic. Needless to say, my perspective will also raise questions that I will not be able to answer in a fully satisfying way, but hopefully such questions will provide us with some stimuli for extending the research. I try to offer some sketchy ideas on these issues in section 4. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 is devoted to contrast in indefinite expressions: bare nouns receive a special attention, but indefinite determiners and interrogatives are considered as well. Section 3 is a brief sketch on contrast in definite DPs, in particular definite descriptions and strong pronouns. Finally, in section 4 a couple of speculative ideas on contrast in interpretation close the paper.

2. Indefinites¹

2.1. Bare plurals as topics

Bare nominals and indefinites provide us with valuable data on the role of contrast in the acceptability of NPs and DPs. Let’s start the discussion with a review of some basic facts in the grammar of bare nouns in Romance, with special attention to bare plurals in Spanish.

¹ This section essentially reproduces ideas developed in Leonetti (forthcoming).

A well known constraint on the distribution of bare nouns in Spanish is the Naked Noun Constraint (NNC). In its original formulation (Suñer 1982: 209), the constraint states that “an unmodified common noun in preverbal position cannot be the surface subject of a sentence under conditions of normal stress and intonation”. This rightly excludes examples like (1) and (2), usually considered ungrammatical sentences in Spanish:

- (1) *Niños jugaban en la calle.
 Children play.PST.3PL in the street
 ‘Children were playing in the street.’
- (2) *Turistas llegaron a la ciudad.
 Tourists arrive.PST.3PL to the city
 ‘Tourists arrived in the city.’

Suñer’s formulation of the NNC mentions some factors that are related to information structure, namely “conditions of normal stress and intonation”. This is important for the generalization to hold, since a special intonation contour that marks the preverbal subject as contrastive Focus (cf. (3a)) or as a dislocated Topic (cf. (3b)) can make sentences like (1) and (2) acceptable:²

- (3) (a) TURISTAS llegaron a la ciudad.
 tourists-FOC arrive.PST.3PL to the city
- (b) Turistas, llegaron (pero no demasiados).
 tourists-TOP arrive.PST.3PL (but not too.many)

A natural account of the contrast between (1)-(2) and (3) should be based on two assumptions. The first one is uncontroversial: the “preverbal position” occupied by the bare plural is not the same in (1)-(2) –the canonical subject position (Spec, IP in the generative tradition)- and (3) – a peripheral position, and a different one in (3a) and (3b), independently of the particular view of the left sentential periphery that one might choose-. The second one may be controversial, but in my opinion gives rise to the most promising account of the constraint on bare nouns in preverbal position: it amounts to assuming, following Suñer’s original insight, that the NNC is related to information structure. More precisely: bare nouns have to be licensed by semantic incorporation (in any of its versions, cf. Dobrovie-Sorin & Laca 2003, Cohen & Erteschik-Shir 2002, Espinal 2009), but such operation is constrained by information structure, and banned from a predominantly topical position like Spec, IP in null-subject languages. The NNC arises as a result of the incompatibility of semantic incorporation (needed for non-referential expressions like bare nouns) and the topical nature of the preverbal subject position in null-subject languages. In Suñer’s (1982:225) terms, “Naked nouns never appear as subjects in preverbal position because these nouns cannot be interpreted as the theme of the sentence”. If this is correct, we have an account of the ungrammaticality of (1)-(2). But why are the examples in (3) perfectly acceptable? Apparently, focalization and dislocation have the power of repairing the anomaly derived from the incompatibility between bare nouns and the preverbal position. However, things are actually a bit more complicated. Focalization and dislocation cannot give acceptable results unless bare plurals are independently licensed as subjects in postverbal position, i.e. unless semantic incorporation can successfully take place in a postverbal position (cf. Laca 1996:259-260). The examples in (4) show that bare plurals cannot make good subjects of transitive verbs –at least, those that represent Individual-Level predicates- even in postverbal position, probably because semantic incorporation cannot apply

² See Laca (1999), RAE (2009) and Leonetti (2012) for an overview of the constraints on the distribution of Spanish bare nouns.

to external arguments in a straightforward manner, and in that case operations of focalization or dislocation cannot rescue them.

- (4) (a) *Tienen orcas una gran aleta dorsal.
 have.3PL orcas a big findorsal
 ‘Killer whales have a big dorsal fin.’
 (b) *ORCAS tienen una gran aleta dorsal.
 (c) *Orcas, tienen una gran aleta dorsal.

What focalization and dislocation tell us with respect to bare plurals is not that they can provide licensing mechanisms for them, but rather that both operations are associated with a meaning ingredient that makes preverbal bare plurals fully acceptable once they are moved away from the basic position where semantic incorporation licenses them. Such ingredient is contrast.

Contrast is obviously present in contrastive focalization, and I will have nothing special to say about this issue. Focalized bare plurals cannot be interpreted as topics, so they fall out of the scope of the NNC and are correctly predicted to be grammatical. Contrast is also present in left dislocations, as (3b) shows, and in this case a more detailed discussion is worth, since at first sight we face a serious counterexample for the NNC: bare plurals should be excluded when they are placed in topic position, but when they are dislocated they are explicitly marked as sentential topics and nonetheless are perfectly acceptable. The central questions are two: 1. why are dislocated bare plurals acceptable, in spite of being interpreted as topics, while they are excluded as preverbal subjects (in null subject languages)? 2. does contrast play some role in the licensing of dislocated bare plurals?

I addressed such questions in Leonetti (forthcoming), and here I will simply take up some ideas from that paper. The different behavior of bare plurals as preverbal subjects and dislocated topics is a result of the different properties of two kinds of topics. The crucial fact is that left dislocation does not impose the same interpretive requirements on nominals than Spec,IP does. Preverbal subjects in Spanish are unmarked, default topics, in sentences that express categorical judgments. I assume that Spec,IP is not endowed with a [+topic] feature. Topicality is not encoded in the preverbal subject position in null-subject languages. It is rather inferred by default, unless the context favors athetic –all-focus- interpretation for the sentence. Left dislocation, on the other hand, marks a constituent as an external, marked topic. Dislocated phrases are linked to a sentence-internal anaphoric element –a clitic, or a null resumptive-. Dislocated bare plurals, in particular, are licensed in the internal position, where semantic incorporation is possible. Notice that this still leaves the central question without an answer –why bare plurals are possible topics only when detached, and not in the preverbal subject position-. My claim is that the asymmetry is related to another fact already pointed out in Suñer (1982:231): all left-dislocated bare nouns must be contrastive. As Suñer puts it (1982: 236), “left-dislocated naked nouns are thematic but contrastive...naked nouns cannot be non-contrastive themes”. In fact, the dislocated bare plural in (3b), *turistas* ‘tourists’ is interpreted as a contrastive topic: it typically evokes a set of contextual alternatives (in (3b), <tourists, workers, immigrants, pilgrims...>, but other sets might be activated in different contexts). Moreover, it has been observed (cf. Brunetti 2009) that Romance left dislocation is quite often contrastive, probably as a consequence of its marked status with respect to the unmarked topical nature of the subject in SV(O) sentences. In Spec,IP, on the contrary, contrastive readings are not available for bare nouns, under normal conditions.

A way to put together all these facts could be the following one. Left dislocation encodes an instruction to interpret the dislocated phrase as the address under which the information carried by the sentence is entered. This is what the classical notion of *aboutness* amounts to. The instruction has to be obligatorily satisfied in the interpretive process. Definite, referential,

familiar DPs are prototypical topics, and thus expressions that make optimal addresses for information update. On the other hand, indefinite DPs and all kinds of non-referential nominals –for instance, bare nouns- are non-prototypical topics. My claim is that indefinites and bare nouns can in fact act as sentence topics, only if some kind of inferential adjustment is triggered, as a part of the interpretive process, that solves the mismatch between the instruction associated to dislocation and that of the linguistic expression: as a result of this reinterpretation mechanism, the expression is assigned a reading that allows the hearer to comply with the instruction. I suggest that the contextual effect triggered by the need to satisfy the instruction associated with external, marked topics is contrast. The prediction is, thus, that all indefinite and non-referential topics will be contrastive³ (see section 2.3 for additional data).

From this point of view, contrast is a significant factor in obtaining a relevant interpretation for bare nominals used as sentence topics. Contrast makes bare plurals become acceptable topics. In left dislocation, it is triggered by the need to comply with a specific interpretive procedure. In preverbal subjects, on the contrary, nothing forces a contrastive reading, as there is no specific instruction to follow. Moreover, semantic incorporation is banned. The consequence is that bare nominals as subjects cannot be interpreted as topics. Now we have an answer for the previous question about external and internal topics, and such answer is based on the role of contrast as a sort of last resort interpretive mechanism. It is quite clear that at this point a new set of relevant questions enters the picture: how is contrast able to rescue the acceptability of certain nominal expressions? Why is it contrast, instead of some other notion, that is involved in the distribution of bare nouns and indefinites?

Despite their importance, I prefer to delay the discussion of these points until the final section, when more empirical evidence for the role of contrast will be available and a wider perspective on the facts will be within reach. For the moment, I will simply add some more data concerning contrast and acceptability of bare plurals in Spanish (in section 2.2), and a brief excursion on the relevance of contrast to conclude this section.

2.2 Bare plurals: additional evidence for the role of contrast

Until now, I have limited the discussion on bare nouns to two positions –preverbal subject and dislocated topic-. But there is additional evidence for the active role of contrast in the interpretation of bare nouns. In this section I focus on three issues that should reinforce the empirical support for the generalization put forward in the previous section: marked objects, postverbal subjects, and modifiers inside the NP.

2.2.1 Marked objects

A well known feature of Spanish syntax is Differential Object Marking (DOM): animate (and mostly specific) direct objects must be marked with the preposition *a*. Less familiar, and not entirely systematic, is the fact that unmodified bare plurals tend to be excluded as marked objects (cf. Brugè & Brugger 1996, Leonetti 2004, López 2012: 52-53), as shown in the examples in (5). In unmarked objects, without *a*, bare plurals are acceptable (if the verb allows semantic incorporation).

- (5) (a) #En el poblado vi a pescadores. (cf. Vi pescadores.)
 In the village see.PST.1SG to fishermen
 ‘In the village I saw fishermen.’

³ I cannot offer a full discussion of this claim here, but the generalization seems to be correct, both for bare nouns and for indefinite DPs. I don't know of any indefinite topic that has a non-contrastive interpretation. See Erteschik-Shir (1997), Arregi (2003), Kiss & Gyuris (2003), and Giurgea & Remberger (2011) for related, though not identical, proposals.

- (b) #Estoy contratando a traductores. (cf. Contrato traductores.)
 Be.PRS.1SG hiring to translators
 ‘I am hiring translators.’

The constraint imposed by marked objects on bare plurals seems to be equivalent to the NNC for preverbal subjects. In fact, the same factors, i.e. focalization and modification, are able to rescue the acceptability of bare plurals in both contexts. The examples in (6) show the effects of (in situ) contrastive focus in DOM contexts, and those in (7) illustrate the effects of restrictive modifiers.

- (6) (a) En el poblado vi a PESCADORES, no a turistas extranjeros.
 In the village see.PST.1SG to fishermen-FOC, not to tourists foreign
 ‘In the village I saw FISHERMEN, not foreign tourists.’
 (b) Yo contrato a TRADUCTORES, no a REDACTORES.
 I hire.PRS.1SG to translators-FOC, not to editors-FOC
 ‘I hire TRANSLATORS, not EDITORS.’
- (7) (a) En el poblado vi a pescadores ya mayores.
 In the village see.PST.1SG to fishermen already old
 ‘In the village I saw old fishermen.’
 (b) Yo contrato a traductores con experiencia.
 I hire-PRS.1SG to translators with experience
 ‘I hire experienced translators.’

The data suggest that bare plurals are excluded as marked objects for the same reason that they are excluded as preverbal subjects. Topicality could be invoked as the semantic feature that is responsible for the limited distribution of bare plurals in DOM contexts, if the preposition *a* is analyzed as a sort of secondary topic marker (as in Leonetti 2004), but this is actually not crucial for my argumentation, and it is not an issue that I can deal with here. From a purely descriptive point of view, the essential fact is that both preverbal subjects and marked objects are hostile environments for bare plurals, and in both cases contrast is the mechanism that is able to make them acceptable, either through focalization or through restrictive modification (I am assuming that modifiers trigger contrast inside NPs/DPs, since they evoke a set of contextual alternatives that contrast with the explicit information in the nominal). This demonstrates that the difference in acceptability between (1)-(2) and (3) is not an isolated phenomenon concerning only subjects, but rather an instance of a general interpretive mechanism.

López (2012:52) accounts for the limited distribution of bare plurals assuming that their Case requirements must be satisfied by incorporation and that they cannot move, neither to Spec,IP as subjects, nor to the functional slot where marked objects –analyzed as scrambled objects- must rise. As for the effects of focalization and modification, he briefly mentions the proposal that “the addition of a modifier or of contrastive focus turns the nominal phrase into a bigger type of constituent that can be selected by K” (2012:53), i.e. the two factors turn the nominal into a phrase that does not need to incorporate to satisfy its Case requirements and thus behaves like a true argument. I agree with the basic intuition about focus and modification, but we still do not fully understand why they allow speakers to override the incompatibility of DOM with bare nouns. In López’s proposal, focalization and modification are apparently able to change the syntactic status of bare nouns; however, there is no clear evidence supporting this interpretation of the facts. I prefer to assume that the key factor for the acceptability of bare nominals in (6) and (7) is the presence of contrast, as I have been arguing for here: if acceptability increases, it is due to this component of interpretation.

Moreover, I am reluctant to accept a purely syntactic view of the constraint in DOM contexts, given that some counterexamples can be found even in the recent *Nueva Gramática de la Lengua Española* (RAE 2009:§15.11g-h, §34.9), with unmodified bare plurals as marked objects:

- (8) (a) ... así que al final contraté a albañiles.
 so that at the end hire.PST.1SG to bricklayers
 ‘... so I ended up hiring bricklayers.’

If examples like the one in (8) are considered acceptable, it may well be that the constraint is much softer than a genuine syntactic restriction, and probably we need a thorough and detailed revision of the alleged incompatibility of DOM and bare plurals –something that falls outside the limits of this paper-. However, RAE (2009:§15.11g) crucially emphasizes that *albañiles* ‘bricklayers’ in (8) receives a “type reading”, i.e. a reading that highlights the kind of persons that were hired, and not the plurality of individuals. I would claim that a type reading is simply the result of focalizing the bare plural, thus activating a set of contextual alternatives where *bricklayers* contrasts with, say, *plumbers*, *painters* and *electricians*. Again, contrast is required to obtain an optimal interpretation of the bare plural in a syntactic context that otherwise would exclude it. This points towards a semantic-pragmatic account of the problem and disfavors a purely syntactic one.

In any case, the proposal in López (2012) contains some valuable insights, like the analysis of Spanish DOM as a case of object scrambling. Scrambled objects -in languages that resort to such syntactic device- behave in many respects like marked objects in DOM languages. Interestingly, object scrambling in Germanic languages provides us with further evidence for the effects of contrast on bare nouns⁴. Kallulli (2005:32) points out that existential bare plurals cannot scramble in German and Dutch, unless they are contrastively focused, as shown in (9).

- (9) German:
 (a) Anna hat nicht Zeitungen gelesen.
 Anna have.PRS.3SG not newspapers read.PTP
 ‘Anna hasn’t read newspapers.’
 (b) *Anna hat Zeitungen nicht gelesen.
 (c) Anna hat ZEITUNGEN nicht gelesen.

Kallulli (2005:36) mentions similar effects with bare singulars in Albanian and Greek: when bare singulars occur as subjects of unergative and transitive predicates, they must necessarily be focused, as in (10)-(11).

- (10) Albanian:
 GJARPËR e kafshoi An-ën. (Albanian)
 snake-FOC her bit An-the
 ‘It was a snake that bit Anna.’

⁴ Scrambling and contrastive readings are not necessarily related in the same way in all languages, and not all kinds of object scrambling trigger the same interpretive effects. However, all I need to support my proposal is that certain instances of object scrambling show properties that are parallel to those exhibited by preverbal subjects in null subject languages. Detailed analyses of scrambling and contrast in different languages can be found in Neeleman & Vermeulen (eds.) (2012).

(11) Greek :

FIDHI ton ikhe dhagósi ton Costa. (Greek)
 snake-FOC him had bitten the Costa
 ‘It was a snake that had bitten Costas.’

Scrambling is not involved this time, but there is a clear connection with all previous data, since the constraint affects bare nouns as external arguments. The common property of marked objects and external arguments is that they represent prominent positions that tend to obstruct and block semantic incorporation. Such obstacles for incorporation are typically circumvented by means of contrast, both in preverbal subjects / external arguments and in marked / scrambled objects, as the next section will try to make clear.

2.2.2 Postverbal subjects in Spanish

The distribution of bare plurals as postverbal subjects in Spanish provides us with interesting clues on the factors that trigger contrast as a repair mechanism. It is widely assumed that bare plurals can occur as postverbal subjects of unaccusative verbs with acceptable results. This is expected, if semantic incorporation can usually take place from internal argument – complement- positions. As for subjects of transitive and unergative verbs –external arguments-, the classical stance is that bare plurals are excluded, unless certain special conditions hold. I will concentrate on one of such conditions: word order as an indication of focus structure. The relevant examples are reproduced in (12), where the verb is transitive (*aprobar* ‘pass’).

- (12) (a) Han aprobado el examen (hasta) [extranjeros]_F
 have.PRS.3PL passed the exam till foreigners.
 ‘Even some foreigners passed the exam.’
 (b) #Han aprobado extranjeros el examen.
 Have.PRS.3PL passed foreigners the exam
 (c) Han aprobado EXTRANJEROS, el examen.
 Have.PRS.3PL passed foreigners-FOC the exam
 ‘FOREIGNERS passed the exam.’

The sentences in which the subject occurs in final position (a, c) are perfectly acceptable. Example (b) displays a VSO order, and is slightly degraded. The difference is related to focus structure: (a) and (c) force narrow focus on the postverbal subject and make a set of contextual alternatives associated with it easily available, while (b) has a wide focus interpretation –typical in VSO sentences- with no contrast on the subject. Thus, it is the availability of contrast in (a) and (c) that makes the difference for the bare plural. And it is as relevant for preverbal subjects as for postverbal subjects, if they are external arguments. Though I started the discussion with the classical NNC, now we face a pervasive phenomenon that affects bare nouns in different positions and had already been correctly perceived in Suñer (1982).

2.2.3 Bare nouns and contrast

Up to this point, I have reviewed situations in which bare plurals need an extra factor to optimize their interpretation, this factor being contrast. Such situations share a significant feature. They involve positions that either impose special requirements on bare nominals – dislocated topics, marked / scrambled objects- or correspond to external arguments, thus hindering semantic incorporation: in a few words, they represent prominent syntactic positions that are in a sense “hostile” to bare nominals. The striking fact is that contrast is relevant for the acceptability of bare plurals precisely in these positions, and not elsewhere –

although contrast may independently occur as a component of interpretation due to contextual factors. In the cases under discussion, contrast seems to appear as a last-resort inferential solution for an interpretative mismatch. The pattern is always the same: a bare plural is placed in a grammatical context where, for some reason, it does not fit in adequately, and far from giving rise to ungrammaticality, it is supplemented by a contrastive component that makes the construction acceptable. If this view is correct, the insertion of contrast to adjust the interpretation of a nominal expression is akin to other well known interpretive operations, such as coercion and accommodation, that can “rescue” otherwise deviant strings (cf. Leonetti and Escandell-Vidal 2011, de Swart 2011). Such operations cannot solve purely grammatical mismatches –in that case, the result is ungrammaticality-, but they are able to provide acceptable readings for strings that include a semantic mismatch. A reasonable hypothesis about the role of contrast in the interpretation of NPs/DPs is that it should be treated as one particular case of a more general procedure for mismatch resolution that includes coercion and accommodation as well.

In what follows, I intend to gather more evidence supporting contrast as a mismatch resolution device for nominals. The big question is under what conditions, and to what extent, contrast can “rescue” deviant strings. For the moment, it may be useful to enlarge our data collection, and show that the idea is relevant not only for bare plurals, but for indefinite DPs too.

2.3 Indefinites as topics

2.3.1 Left dislocated indefinite DPs

As already pointed out in §2.1, the prediction is that all topical indefinites are in some sense contrastive. With dislocated indefinite DPs, I believe that the prediction is clearly borne out – other topical indefinites are discussed in §2.3.2. The following examples illustrate both the case of specific interpretations and the case of non-specific interpretations (often discarded or ignored in the literature, but quite common at least in Romance Left Dislocation):

(13) Italian (Rizzi 2005):

Un libro, l' ho letto. Italian (Rizzi 2005)
 A book it have.1SG read
 ‘A book, I’ve read.’

(14) Catalan (Vallduví 2002):

Un gelat, me’ l menjaria amb molt de gust. Catalan (Vallduví 2002)
 An ice-cream me it would-eat.1SG with much of pleasure
 ‘An ice-cream, I would eat with pleasure.’

(15) Spanish (Leonetti 2011):

Dos países de África, sí (los) habíamos visitado.
 Two countries of Africa yes them had.1PL visited
 ‘(At least) two countries in Africa, we had visited.’

Some comments on (13) can give a precise idea of the role of contrast. The example in (13) is ambiguous between a specific and a non-specific reading. In the specific reading, the speaker is asserting that (s)he read a particular book that (s)he is presumably able to identify. Such book is the entity the sentence is about. This is considered as the most natural reading –and sometimes the only one- in the literature on indefinites and topicality. It is commonly assumed that topicality constrains the range of interpretations that an indefinite DP may have: more precisely, it constrains the choice of a value for the discourse referent that indefinites introduce, and specificity arises as an effect of such constraint. But a non-specific reading is

possible as well. On the non-specific reading, the sentence can be paraphrased as ‘It is true that I read at least one book’: the speaker communicates no intention to refer to any specific book, and the hearer is not directed towards the insertion of a new file card in the discourse model. The indefinite DP does not introduce a discourse referent. It is intriguing how a non-specific indefinite can survive in a syntactic position that forces its interpretation as a link, i.e. as an adequate address for information update. The reason why indefinites often make poor topics is well known: they do not encode an instruction to identify an accessible referent. With indefinites, then, a new address has to be built, and the question is how this is accomplished in the case of non-specifics.

I assume that the conflict between the instruction associated to links and the semantics of indefinite DPs must be solved by pragmatically inferring an interpretation of the indefinite that is able to satisfy the requirement imposed by the topic. The two readings of *un libro* ‘a book’ in (13) represent two different ways to solve the conflict.

For the specific reading to be obtained, the hearer has to suppose that there is a certain property that the speaker is not making explicit and is restrictive enough to reduce the search for a referent to a particular individual. The set of books where the referent belongs may have been contextually specified: in this case, the information required to connect the topic to the previous discourse has already been provided – i.e. the set of books is available for the hearer too, and a partitive reading is naturally inferred; if the set has not been previously mentioned, the hearer tries to accommodate it, with the same result. The indefinite defines a partition on a given set, and a new address for information update is built, in accordance with the requirements of dislocation. The result is a partitive specific interpretation of the indefinite DP, where contrast distinguishes the intended referent from the rest of the books in the contextual set. Notice that contrast is necessarily involved in the specification of the intended reading.

As for the non-specific reading, its felicity conditions are stricter. This is not surprising, given that non-specific indefinites are less amenable to be used as topics. In the non-specific interpretation, (13) would hardly be used ‘out of the blue’ or in a neutral context: it would typically count as a refusal of a previous contextual assumption like ‘You haven’t read any book’ (thus, it would represent a sort of echoic use). Notice that the non-specific topic is again associated with a contrastive reading (‘one, but possibly no more’, or ‘one book, but possibly nothing else’), by which one item is contrasted with other possible items inside a series or a group. The same happens in the two remaining examples in (14) and (15), where the topical indefinites are preferably non-specific. In the Catalan sentence in (14), *un gelat* ‘an ice-cream’ introduces a set of contextual alternatives, roughly corresponding to the set of possibilities for the dessert: {ice-cream, yoghurt, crème caramel, apple pie...}. A contrastive reading is made salient, by which the speaker communicates his/her willingness to have an ice-cream, and excludes other cases like eating some yoghurt, eating some crème caramel, eating some apple pie... In the Spanish example in (15), the topic is *dos países de África* ‘two countries in Africa’, and the contrast set could be something like {no country in Africa, one country in Africa...}; as suggested by the gloss, the salient interpretation is ‘It is true that we had visited at least two countries in Africa’.

I believe the evidence is enough to reach two conclusions. The first one is that, as already observed in Umbach (2004), building on a previous proposal attributed to Regina Eckardt, it is the kind of contrast sets that are available in the context that determine the salience of specific and non-specific readings. Partitive specificity results from the contrast between one element –or more– in a set and the remaining members of such set. Non-specific readings, on the other hand, result from other contrast sets where the alternatives are triggered by focus on the determiner (as in {no book, one book, some books...}) or on the common noun (as in {ice-cream, yoghurt, crème caramel, apple pie...}). It all depends on the process of identifying embedded focus structures inside the topical constituents of the sentence that Erteschik-Shir

(1997) defined as ‘subordinate update’. This simply reinforces the assumption that contrast plays a major role in the interpretation of topical indefinites.

The second conclusion is that dislocated topics in (13)-(15) clearly belong to the class of *contrastive topics* (cf. Kiss and Gyuris 2003, Krifka 2007, Giurgea and Remberger 2011, Torregrossa 2012). The typical features of contrastive topics are salient in the examples⁵:

- the most characteristic one is the activation of contextual alternatives in the interpretation, already commented. The refutative value of utterances with non-specific indefinite topics –i.e. their restrictive condition of use in discourse– is an effect of choosing one alternative and discarding the rest of alternatives in a contextual domain.

- a second typical feature is an incompleteness or uncertainty implicature: the speaker indicates that (s)he is unable or unwilling to support more informative readings of the utterance. In (13), for instance, the speaker claims that at least one book has been read, but the exact quantity of books that were read is not specified. In (15), it is said that two African countries had been visited, but the speaker is not explicit about the total number of countries that (s)he actually visited. According to Giurgea and Remberger (2011), the indefinite topic corresponds to the weakest claim in a series: the speaker asserts that this claim is certainly true or highly probable, contrasting it with stronger claims for which the truth value is unknown.

It may be worth to add a brief clarification concerning the status of contrastive topics. Some authors believe that contrastive topics have to be formally distinguished from aboutness topics (cf. Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2008 for a syntactic approach). I assume a different perspective, in which aboutness topics and contrastive topics are rather viewed as two ways in which a dislocated topic can fit in the context. The syntax and semantics of dislocation remain the same, but the overall interpretation is inferentially elaborated along different paths depending on the nature of the topical constituent (definite or indefinite, specific or non-specific) and the context. The specification of contrastive relations is a part of the inferential process by which an optimal interpretation is accessed by the hearer. If this is true, the distinction *aboutness* / *contrastive* is entirely dependent on the context (and on intonation, an issue I cannot deal with here). Notice that if the two kinds of topic are not kept separated, then the widely held assumption that topicality is associated to specificity (in indefinites) cannot be maintained: it works for aboutness topics only.

The correlation between non-specific indefinite topics and contrastiveness is, thus, well established. My conclusion is that indefinite dislocated topics are always contrastive in some sense. Contrast is here forced as a sort of last resort mechanism that operates in the search for an optimal interpretation, in particular in the search for a reading that allows the hearer to take an indefinite expression as an acceptable topic (i.e. an acceptable address for information update). The address for information update that the topic must provide is, in the case of non-specific indefinites, harder to determine than with specific indefinites and with definite DPs: reconstructing it is an inferential operation that requires combining the indefinite DP with different pieces of background information (in (10), for instance, the address would be something like ‘As for reading books,...’). This is why the conditions of use are stricter for non-specifics. In any case, contrast is involved in making indefinites acceptable dislocated topics. To sum up, the survival of weak, non-specific readings in indefinite topics is dependent on contrast. It seems clear that the facts cannot be unrelated to what happens with bare plurals: the role of contrast is the same, i.e. providing interpretive material that allows a nominal expression to fit in a grammatical context that tends to block its occurrence.

⁵ Parallel facts in Hindi are discussed in Dayal (2003).

2.3.2 Spanish *unos* and preverbal subjects

A look at indefinite DPs as preverbal subjects in Spanish can give us additional evidence for the role of contrast in interpretation. As I already mentioned, preverbal subjects in null subject languages like Spanish tend to be interpreted as sentence topics, though this is not an obligatory requirement. An indefinite preverbal subject typically receives a specific reading if it is topical. In such case, the specific reading may involve contrast (when it is partitive) or not. More interesting is the case of indefinite subjects that for some reason are not amenable to a specific reading. The plural indefinite *unos* ‘some’ provides us with relevant data. As Laca and Tasmowski – De Ryck (1996:123) and Gutiérrez-Rexach (2010), among many others, point out, *unos* receives a characteristically weak interpretation and it is usually incompatible with an Individual-Level predicate. In fact, (16a), with an Individual-Level predicate like *ser inteligente* ‘to be intelligent’ is slightly deviant (at least, out of context). However, if by means of a continuation with *otros* ‘others’, as in (16b), a contrastive interpretation is forced, with two groups of boys compared to each other, the use of *unos* becomes perfectly acceptable:

- (16) (a) #Unos niños son inteligentes.
 some boys be.3PL intelligent
 ‘Some boys are intelligent’
- (b) Unos niños son inteligentes, otros no tanto.
 some boys be.3PL intelligent others no so much
 ‘Some boys are intelligent, others not so much’

In (16b) the hearer is compelled to assign a partitive reading to the subject *unos niños*. Contrast appears as a result of the partition established on the set of boys. Partitivity is in fact the variety of specific interpretation that is typically linked to topics. The relevant fact is that the acceptability of a weak indefinite as topic is again dependent on contrast.

Generic indefinites are a case of indefinite topical subject where the context blocks specific readings and partitivity is, thus, irrelevant. Nevertheless, generic indefinites too are associated to contrast, as Erteschik-Shir (1997: 121) suggests. The idea is that generic indefinites, like *a beaver* in (17), are licensed by contrast inside a restrictive set available from the context or inferable (for instance, {beaver, racoon, bear...}), and such restrictive set is the entity that counts as topic (it is obtained from background material). Thus, even if a non-specific indefinite DP is not an adequate address for information update *per se*, contrast licenses its use as a topic in generic contexts⁶.

- (17) A beaver builds dams.

In Erteschik-Shir’s view, given that an indefinite is not an optimal topic, contrast inside a contextually accessible set is inferred to force an interpretation that solves the clash between the semantics of the indefinite DP and the condition imposed by the predicate (or the generic context). This is in line with all the data previously presented. When used as topics, indefinite DPs and bare plurals undergo the same kind of interpretive process. Specifically, every time we place in a topic position some expression that can hardly count as an aboutness topic (not only non-specific indefinites and bare nominals, but also predicative adjectives or infinitives), a contrastive reading is obtained.

⁶ A different proposal can be found in Cohen (2008).

2.4 Interrogatives: D-linking

Interrogatives are to some extent similar to indefinites (in fact, they are the same thing in a number of languages). So it would be not surprising that contrast could be relevant to their interpretation under the same conditions that hold for indefinites. The parallelism I intend to focus on concerns interrogative subordinate clauses. It is well known that indirect interrogatives are weak islands (*wh*-islands): they ban the extraction of adjunct *wh*-phrases, as the contrasting status of the two stereotypical examples in (18a) and (18b) shows.

- (18) (a) What do you wonder [how John could fix _]?
 (b) *How do you wonder [what John could fix _]?

In (18a) an argument –the direct object- is extracted, whereas in (18b) it is an adjunct that is extracted (*how*), with the result that acceptability clearly decreases. The literature on *wh*-islands soon pointed out that certain factors can affect the acceptability of *wh*-extractions, and the most widely discussed factor is *Discourse-linking* (D-linking). D-linked *wh*-phrases are usually defined as nominals that define a partition on a contextually given and presupposed set of entities (i.e. a set that is already in the mind of the speaker or has already been established in discourse). Extraction of argument *wh*-phrases from *wh*-islands, according to the literature, gives more acceptable results when the *wh*-phrases are D-linked (typically with *which N* phrases instead of bare interrogatives like *who* or *what*); with non-D-linked *wh*-phrases, extraction results in slightly deviant sentences. The Italian examples in (19a-b) illustrate the contrast (cf. Cinque 1990, Cruschina 2011: ch. 4); (19c) shows that another kind of extraction, namely focalization of arguments, is possible in Italian across weak islands.

- (19) (a) ??A chi ti chiedi quanti soldi hai dato?
 to whom REFL ask.2SG how much money have.2SG given
 ‘To whom are you wondering how much money you gave?’
 (b) A quale dei tuoi figli ti chiedi quanti soldi hai dato?
 to which of your sons REFL ask.2SG how much money have.2SG given
 ‘To which of your children are you wondering how much money you gave?’
 (c) A GIANNI mi chiedo quanti soldi hai dato.
 to John-FOC REFL ask.1SG how- much money have.2SG given

Notice that D-linking implies a contrast among contextual alternatives that are mutually manifest to the speaker and the hearer. In (19b), the possible values for the answer belong to a restricted set that is contextually specified. This gives us the clue to recognize a pattern that should be already familiar by now: if the *wh*-phrase is non-D-linked and there is no contrast inside a given set, the acceptability of extraction is degraded, but if the *wh*-phrase is D-linked and contrast is activated, then the survival of the phrase in a hostile environment like a weak island is guaranteed. One could reasonably claim that contrast acts here again as a mismatch resolution mechanism. As for focalization in (19c), it is again contrast the interpretive property that D-linked *wh*-phrases share with fronted foci. Then, it is expected that focalization is as acceptable as extraction of D-linked *wh*-phrases. A syntactic parallelism between the two categories is defended in Cruschina (2011: ch. 4).

Contrast is encoded in certain D-linked phrases (in case they show a partitive structure, as in (19b)), but can also be forced as an inferred feature of the interpretation in others, such as in bare *wh*-operators that receive a certain prosodic prominence in a syntactic context where their acceptability is expected to be unclear, as in (20). Here contrast is only one among different possible contextual enrichments of prosodic prominence:

- (20) ¿A QUIÉN no sabes cuánto dinero le has dado?
 to whom-EMP not know.2SG how-much money CI have.2SG given
 ‘To whom don’t you know how much money you gave?’

The overall picture shows now a clear parallelism with what we already noticed in the behavior of bare plurals and indefinites. D-linking happens to be just a particular case of a more general phenomenon involving contrast. At least two important questions emerge at this point. One is why D-linking is able to affect acceptability levels in weak islands. The other is what D-linking can tell us about the nature of *wh*-islands.

As for the first question, there is no clear answer in the generative tradition, for all I know. I would be prone to accept an account in terms of processing, along the lines of Hofmeister and Sag (2010): the idea is that D-linked *wh*-phrases contribute to narrow down the list of focus alternatives that have to be considered in answering a question, thus reducing computational effort and improving acceptability. This is in accordance with the effects already observed for contrast in bare plurals and indefinites: contrast offers some kind of reward that makes worth the processing of a phrase in a context where it does fit in adequately.

As for the second question, the fact that D-linking improves acceptability in weak islands suggests that weak islands do not behave as purely syntactic constraints. Were they purely syntactic restrictions, their effects should be stronger and more systematic. If semantic and discourse factors like D-linking are able to dissolve such effects, it seems natural to think of *wh*-islands as resulting from some semantic mismatch or from a combination of factors that conspire to increase processing difficulty. This, in principle, favors a processing view of islands constraints, against a strictly grammatical view. The solutions usually invoked in formal syntax, such as assuming that D-linked and non-D-linked *wh*-phrases are syntactically distinct from each other (because of the presence of [+topic] features or different internal configurations), are an attempt to recast the problem in syntactic terms, but in my view there is no serious evidence supporting them. I would rather assume that a contrastive reading is the main property distinguishing D-linked DPs from non-D-linked ones. Contrast seems to be unable to ‘rescue’ extraction from strong islands (cf. coordinated structures, complex DPs). This might be an indication that strong islands are of a different nature and call for a different explanation.

Thus, the whole issue looks like a particular case of the more general phenomenon I am describing here: contrast is an interpretive device that is able to provide acceptable readings of DPs that occur in syntactic contexts where they would not fit in adequately otherwise. *Wh*-phrases may survive in certain hostile environments –i.e. when they are extracted from weak islands– if contrast appears, and this should be related to the role of contrast in the interpretation of indefinite DPs and bare nouns.

3. Definite DPs

3.1. Definites in existential contexts

This section briefly presents some extensions of the previous ideas in the field of definiteness. The first issue I want to examine is the Definiteness Effect (DE), in particular in French existential impersonal constructions, where the subject must be obligatorily postverbal and indefinite. The data are taken from the recent discussion of the problem in Zimmermann (2012). The ban against definite DPs is quite clear in examples like (21).

- (21) *Il arrive les/ ces/ ses filles. (cf. Il arrive des filles)
 it arrive.3SG the these his/her girls

As it happens in many DE contexts in other languages, there are counterexamples to the constraint. Such counterexamples occur in allegedly ‘highly restrictive’ conditions that French grammars try to specify accurately. Some examples appear in (22):

- (22) (a) Il reste / manque les filles.
 it remain.3SG / be-missing.3SG the girls
 ‘There remain the girls. / The girls are missing.’
- (b) Il a dormi ici Jean, Paul et François.
 it have.3SG slept here Jean Paul and François
 ‘Jean, Paul and François have slept here.’
- (c) Il est arrivé l’ électricien.
 it be.3SG arrived the electrician
 ‘The electrician arrived.’

The problem is that grammars usually offer a list of contexts and factors, but not a true account of the availability of counterexamples. Zimmermann (2012) proposes an alternative unified view based on information structure, where features such as definiteness, anaphoricity or referentiality are no longer the central pieces in the explanation. According to Zimmermann, French existential impersonal constructions impose the condition that the postverbal DP must be focused. This requirement is trivially satisfied by indefinite DPs either as instances of informational focus or as instances of contrastive focus. Not surprisingly, definite DPs have to obey a stricter condition: they must be instances of narrow focus / contrastive focus; otherwise they are excluded. Their referents are implicitly or explicitly contrasted with other entities in a given contextual set. The examples in (22) satisfy this condition. And the classical examples of violations of the DE in English existential constructions (so-called “list” or “enumerative” readings of definite DPs) seem to obey it as well, as shown in (23) (from Abbott 1993).

- (23) (a) – Is there anything to eat?
 – Well, there’s the leftover chicken from last night.
- (b) – I guess we’ve called everybody.
 – No, there’s still Mary and John.

The facts surely deserve a more detailed discussion, but I believe that Zimmermann’s approach is correct. For my purpose, it is enough to observe that a) definites obey a stronger constraint than indefinites, since existential constructions are “hostile” environments for definite nominals, and b) the constraint involves narrow focus. My proposal is that narrow focus becomes relevant just because it triggers contrast among contextual alternatives, and contrast allows definite DPs to “survive” in an existential context. Contrast, then, seems to have beneficial effects both for the interpretation of definite DPs and for the interpretation of indefinite DPs. I am aware that this proposal has to face at least one serious obstacle: one could rightly wonder why this mechanism is active in French (and maybe English), but not in other languages. Spanish existential sentences, for instance, do not admit counterexamples to the DE under the same conditions as French existential impersonal sentences. At this point I would simply recall that the DE is a complex phenomenon, and we cannot expect that DE contexts display exactly the same properties in every language. Additional factors could override the role of contrast under certain conditions. This remains an open question.

3.2. Strong pronouns in null-subject languages

In Romance linguistics it is common to describe strong pronouns (more precisely, overt subject pronouns), in opposition to weak / null pronouns, as special forms that are mostly used for emphasis and contrast. Strong pronouns are obligatory when they are in focus, and when the antecedent contrasts with another referent in the domain of discourse. A recent proposal about Romance overt subject pronouns is put forward in Mayol (2010): in an attempt to offer a precise analysis of the contrastive import of these pronouns, the author claims that non-focal contrastive overt subject pronouns are Contrastive Topic markers. As such, they trigger topic alternatives and convey an implicature of uncertainty by which the speaker ignores whether other alternatives are true or not. The Catalan example in (24), adapted from Mayol (2010), gives an intuitive grasp of the proposal.

- (24) –¿Què voldran per sopar?
 What want.FUT.3PL for dinner
 ‘What will you have for dinner?’
 A: –Bé, doncs jo vull pollastre. B: – Doncs, jo vull sopa.
 well then I want.1SG chicken then I want.1SG soup
 A: –Well, I’ll have chicken. B: -Well, I will have soup.’

In A’s response, the pronoun *jo* ‘I’ introduces topic alternatives (‘B will have soup’, ‘C will have soup’...), with the implicature that the truth of the alternatives is not known by the speaker. The answers in (24) count as partial answers to the question. Mayol rightly points out that answering with a null pronoun instead of *jo* would be perfectly grammatical, but it would not introduce the alternatives and would be understood as a complete answer. Leaving aside the details of Mayol’s hypothesis, as well as the fact that other non-pronominal expressions (for instance, proper names) could be contrastive topics too in the same context, I just assume that a contrastive component is typically associated with the interpretation of overt subject pronouns, and that the notion of *contrastive topic* is as useful in this case as it was for the analysis of indefinites in section 2.3. However, the question that attracts my interest is this: why are overt subject pronouns typically contrastive? An answer like ‘Because their semantics includes a [+contrast] feature’ would not be particularly illuminating. Moreover, it is surely false, since strong pronouns are not always contrastive (for instance, when they occur in contexts where they are the only possible choice, null pronouns being excluded for some grammatical reason). Contrast in the interpretation of overt pronouns must rather appear as a result of choosing to use the pronoun in a certain context. But how?

It seems to me quite natural to apply to strong pronouns the same ideas on contrast that I applied to bare plurals and indefinites. In order to do this, it is essential to take into account that strong pronouns in Null-Subject languages compete with null / weak pronouns in the expression of subject arguments. When two alternative forms are in competition (i.e. a weak pronoun vs a strong pronoun, or an unstressed pronoun vs. a stressed pronoun), they usually convey different interpretations. In this case, the weak form is optimally interpreted as a continuing topic, whereas the other one represents a shifted / contrastive topic, as we can observe in (25).

- (25) La presidenta empujó a la secretaria y {Ø / ella} la insultó.
 the president push.PST.3SG to the secretary and she her insult.PST.3SG
 ‘The president pushed the secretary and she insulted her.’

If Ø is chosen, the interpretation is that the null pronoun refers to the discourse topic (the subject of the first sentence, *la presidenta*). If *ella* is chosen, the insertion of the overt pronoun means that something other than what is usually conveyed by a null pronoun has to

be expressed, and the interpretation is that there is a topic shift, and a new topic is introduced: the overt pronoun takes *la secretaria* as its antecedent, and the contrast established between the two possible antecedents becomes a component of its interpretation. Contrastive readings arise not because contrast is encoded in the linguistic meaning of pronouns, but because there must be some justification for choosing to use an overt pronoun instead of a less costly item like a null pronoun, and contrast is a natural pay-off for such choice, given that referent identification is at stake and contrast is usually subordinated to the determination of reference. Thus, contrast is a mechanism operating in the inferential phase of interpretation, and in particular in establishing the reference of a nominal expression. The parallelism with contrast in bare plurals and indefinites could seem to be obscured by the fact that in the case of pronouns there are no “hostile environments”. However, the situation is quite similar. Being in competition with a more economical item is equivalent to being placed in a “hostile environment”, in the sense that some reason for using the costlier form must be found in order to obtain a relevant reading.

To sum up, strong pronouns receive contrastive readings in positions where they alternate with weak / null pronouns, as a result of the competition between two group of items. Strong pronouns are marked forms: they are more complex than weak / null pronouns. The use of a marked element must be rewarded with a marked reading, and contrast – between referents, or between situations – appears in the use of strong pronouns as an extra component of interpretation (cf. de Hoop 2003, Kaiser 2010).

4. Speculations / Consequences

In the preceding sections I have been pursuing two goals. One is building a unified account of a series of facts that, to my knowledge, had never been gathered under a single perspective. Such series of facts includes ways to circumvent a classical constraint on bare plurals in Spanish, the behavior of indefinite DPs as topics (both in dislocation and as preverbal subjects), certain counterexamples to the Definiteness Effect in French impersonal existential, and the interpretation of overt subject pronouns in Null-Subject languages. If my proposals are on the right track, this should at least provide us with some insights on the interpretation of NPs/DPs.

The second goal is more theory-oriented, and more ambitious too. My aim is to investigate how mismatch resolution works in interpretive tasks (see Leonetti and Escandell-Vidal 2011 for some ideas). I have been trying to describe a recurring pattern: contrast is pragmatically inferred as a way of solving some kind of interpretive mismatch, either a mismatch involving a DP and its position, or the competition between two alternative expressions in the same position. This interpretive pattern presupposes that a number of linguistic mismatches are in fact solved by speakers and hearers in their interaction, that such process is to a certain extent systematic, and that interpretation is the result of combining decoding and inference. We already have strong evidence that these assumptions are essentially correct. But a look at the pattern of occurrence of contrast in nominals still raises several questions. Here I want to focus on two questions that can lead us to explore crucial aspects of the problem:

1. Why is the resolution mechanism linked to contrast?
2. How is the resolution process constrained?

At this point, the answers have to be rather speculative.

1. Why contrast? Contrast provides the interpreter with a reward for adjusting the interpretation of a constituent in a context where “something more” is required to access an adequate reading. I would like to cast the idea in Relevance-theoretic terms (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986), exploiting the assumption that processing effort must be counterbalanced by contextual effects in utterance interpretation. The data I examined represent examples of inferential processes in building the basic explicature of an utterance –i.e. the proposition that

the utterance explicitly communicates; reference determination is always a contribution to the specification of propositional explicatures. In Leonetti forthcoming I suggest for bare plurals that a marked use of a bare nominal in a context where semantic incorporation is not straightforward forces the hearer to wonder what is “behind” such choice, and contrastivity is a natural way out because it introduces a set of contextual alternatives that have to be considered in interpreting and allow the hearer to figure out the consequences of enlarging the context that way. The intuition can perfectly work for other kinds of nominals. Considering a range of contextual alternatives is a way of ensuring that some contextual effects will be obtained, as contrast establishes a connection with previous discourse and a basis for inferentially expanding the context. Once the available set of alternatives satisfies the need for rewarding benefits created by a costly operation, optimal relevance is achieved. In very simple terms, contrast provides a direct way of enriching interpretation. This could explain why it is so pervasive. It remains to be clarified whether contrast is relevant too in the interpretation of non-nominal categories.

2. What are the limits of the resolution process? It seems clear that contrast cannot repair whatever kind of mismatches. Intuitively, only “soft” restrictions affecting NPs/DPs can be neutralized by resorting to a contrastive reading. The Definiteness Effect and the Naked Noun Constraint are among them. This means that they can no longer be treated as syntactic constraints. If they were, they would behave as “strong” constraints –the ones that cannot be violated and give rise to ungrammaticalities. Thus, this provides evidence for considering them as constraints based on semantic and discourse principles, rather than on syntactic rules. This is one of the positive consequences of investigating mismatch resolution: it allows us to determine which mismatches can be repaired and, as a consequence, what is the nature of the corresponding constraints. Obviously, there is much to be gained for a better understanding of the syntax – semantics interface and the grammar – pragmatics distinction.

An in-depth study should give us more precise indications about the conditions under which mismatch resolution takes place. The task exceeds the limits of this paper. A model for such study could be the ample literature devoted to accommodation phenomena and the discourse conditions for accommodation of presuppositions. Accommodation is, in fact, another case of mismatch resolution. Ultimately, a detailed investigation should lead to a better understanding of the notion *contrast*.

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The syntax-semantics interface of avertive and proximative in Romance

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1. Introduction*

Since Kuteva (1998; 2001) the proximative (‘be about to’) as an imminent gram and the avertive (‘was on the verge of taking place, but did not take place’) expressing imminence, past time reference and counterfactuality are considered to be two distinct but closely related grams. Given the functional overlap of proximative and avertive when the proximative is used in past contexts, the separation of the two grams is a known problem (cf. Kuteva 2001). Furthermore, Bellosta von Colbe (2001a; b) gives a first overview about the periphrases in Romance languages by using the related terms *de conatu* and *frustrierte Imminenz* (‘frustrative’). In spite of their common functional relationship I will discuss that a closer look into the pragmatics-semantics interface allows to distinguish between *de conatu*, frustrative, proximative and avertive using pragmatic tests like the cancellability test (cf. Schwellenbach 2009).

Regarding their diachronic relationship, there has been no consensus on the direction of their grammaticalization path: Despite the grammaticalization path observed by Kuteva (1998; 2001) in Bulgarian which gives rise to an avertive-to-proximative development via generalization (i.e. loss of specificity with respect to pastness and counterfactuality), Bellosta von Colbe (2001a; b) proposes the alternative route proximative-to-avertive (i.e. addition of specificities by the conventionalization of inferences) for Romance languages.

The aim of the present article is threefold: Firstly, I will determine the difference between the two categories in Romance languages and their related terms ‘frustrative’ and *imperfectum de conatu*. Secondly, I will show that the proximative periphrases in Romance languages are characterized by an imperfective morphology which allows the cancellability of counterfactuality by reason of semantic underspecification. In contrast, the avertive periphrases are characterized by a perfective morphology while their expression of counterfactuality should not be cancellable. Finally, the grammaticalization path proximative-to-avertive will be discussed by empirical evidence from Ibero-Romance languages.

2. Distinguishing avertive, proximative, frustrative and *imperfectum de conatu*

According to Kuteva (1998; 2001; 2009) the avertive is a ‘semantically elaborate grammatical category’ situated at the intersection of aspectuality, temporality and modality denoting imminence, past time reference and counterfactuality. In contrast, the proximative denotes a ‘semantically straightforward grammatical category’ being a purely aspectual gram involving imminence. Given the underspecification with regard to the temporal and the modal domain, the proximative can be used in present, past and future tense “with (crucially) *no* implication that the situation did not actually occur” (Kuteva 2009:19). I formalize the difference between avertive and proximative as illustrated in table 1:

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