

[PL]: One morpheme, many understandings

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NASSLI 2025
06/25, 2025

1 The basic pattern

Unmarked singular nouns refer to just one individual. But plural-marked nouns may be understood in two different ways: (e.g. Krifka 1989; Sauerland 2003; Sauerland et al. 2005; Spector 2007)

- (1) a. Lina harvested **tomatoes**.
- b. Lina didn't harvest **tomatoes**.

For (1a) to be true, Lina must have harvested **2 or more** tomatoes. The plural-marked noun is understood **exclusively**: {*ab, ac, bc, abc*}.

For (1b) to be true, Lina must not have harvested **any** tomatoes (i.e. **one or more**). The plural-marked noun is understood **inclusively**: {*a, b, c, ab, ac, bc, abc*}.

The difference in clusivity may or may not be found cross-linguistically:

- (2) Spanish (✓clusivity contrast)
 - a. A la fiesta asistieron profesore-s
to the party attended professor-PL
'The party was attended by **(2 or more) professors**'
 - b. A la fiesta no asistieron profesore-s
to the party NEG attended professor-PL
'The party was not attended by **any professors**' (Martí 2008)
- (3) Turkish (*clusivity contrast)
 - a. Azar çocuk-**lar** bak-iyor
Azar child-PL care-IMPF.3SG
'Azar takes care of **(2 or more) children**'
 - b. Azar çocuk-**lar** bak-mi-iyor
Azar child-PL care-NEG-IMPF.3SG
'Azar does not take care of **(2 or more) children**' (Dali and Mathieu 2021)

The questions raised:

- In what environments do the exclusive/inclusive contrasts arise?
- What is the meaning of the [PL] morpheme?

We will see that the inclusive understanding is generally restricted to downward entailing contexts and negative polarity environments.

The analytic approaches vary:

- the basic meaning of [PL] is always inclusive and the exclusive is derived from it.
- [PL] is lexically ambiguous and pragmatic competition determines which one is chosen.
- the basic meaning of [PL] is always exclusive, and the inclusive is derived from it.

2 The distribution of inclusive and exclusive plurals

2.1 negation

We have seen that inclusive understandings arise under sentential negation, e.g. (1b).

They also arise under the scope of negative indefinite *no*:

- (4) a. Messi scored (some) goals last night.
Exclusive, #inclusive
- b. Messi scored **no** goals last night.
#Exclusive, inclusive

2.2 conditionals

Inclusive understandings are also found in the antecedent of conditionals (e.g. the *if*-clause):

- (5) a. [**If** I get tenure], I will write **books**.
Exclusive, #inclusive
- b. [**If** I write **books**], I will get tenure.
#Exclusive, inclusive

2.3 Questions

Inclusive understandings are also found in questions:

- (6) a. Messi scored goals last night.
Exclusive, #inclusive
- b. Did Messi score goals last night?
#Exclusive, inclusive

2.4 Restrictor of universal quantifier

Inclusive understandings are also found when the NP is in the restrictor of *every*.

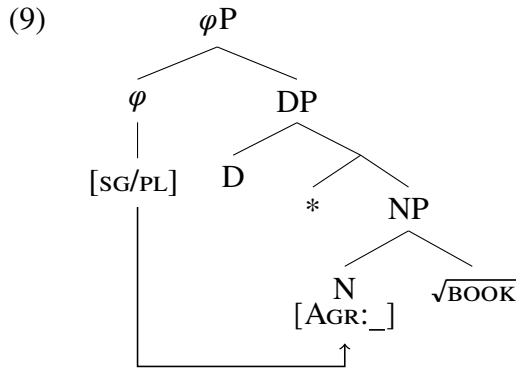
- (7) a. [The [house with **windows** overlooking the ocean]] is overpriced.
Exclusive, #inclusive
b. [**Every** [house with **windows** overlooking the ocean]] is overpriced.
#Exclusive, inclusive

3 Different analyses

3.1 Sauerland (2003): the inclusive-only view

The underlying hypothesis: there is a markedness asymmetry between morphology and semantics, i.e. Anti-Horn's pattern:¹ (See also Bale et al. 2011)

- (8) Morphologically marked forms must be semantically unmarked, but morphologically unmarked forms are semantically marked.



- (10) a. $\llbracket *NP \rrbracket = \lambda x. *N(x)$ $\{a, b, c, ab, ac, bc, abc\}$
b. $\llbracket SG \rrbracket = \lambda P: \forall x [P(x) \rightarrow \text{atom}(x)].P$
c. $\llbracket PL \rrbracket = \lambda P.P$
(11) a. $\llbracket book \rrbracket = \llbracket SG \rrbracket(\llbracket *NP \rrbracket) = \{a, b, c\}$
b. $\llbracket books \rrbracket = \llbracket PL \rrbracket(\llbracket *NP \rrbracket) = \{a, b, c, ab, ac, bc, abc\}$

Number-marking on nouns is the result of agreement: $\text{Agree}(\phi, N)$.

Only [sg] is semantically marked: it encodes the presupposition that the extension of its argument has only atoms.

The distribution of [PL] is not constrained by an inherent presupposition. But it is constrained by the general maxim Maximize Presupposition. (Heim 1991)

- (12) Use the most specific agreement feature possible whose presupposition is satisfied.

When a singular referent is intended, singular morphology surfaces on the noun used to reference it. Otherwise, [PL] and its concomitant plural morphology appear.

¹There are many variations of the inclusive-only approach that relies on competition or alternatives. See for example e.g Spector (2007); Zweig (2009); Bylinina and Podobryaev (2020).

The clusivity asymmetry

Sauerland's proposal gets the inclusive understanding of the plural by default.

$$(13) \quad \llbracket \text{PL } *NP \rrbracket = \llbracket *NP \rrbracket = \lambda x. *N(x) \quad \{a, b, c, ab, ac, bc, abc\}$$

Exclusive interpretations can be explained by appealing to pragmatic competition between (11b) and (11a).

$$(14) \quad \llbracket \text{Lina harvested tomatoes} \rrbracket = \text{'Lina harvested one or more tomatoes'}$$

$$(15) \quad \llbracket \text{Lina harvested a tomato} \rrbracket = \text{'Lina harvested exactly one tomato'}$$

- The proposition in (14) is entailed by the proposition that results from the use of the singular form in (15).
- Competition: since the speaker did not choose the more informative proposition, e.g. (15), the speaker does not believe that Lina harvested one or more than one tomato.
- The result is an exclusive interpretation of *tomatoes*.

Some concerns

A. Cancellation of implicatures: these number inferences are harder to suspend than regular scalar implicatures. (Dali and Mathieu 2021)

(16) Some of the professors left. In fact, all of them did.

(17) Mary bought books. #In fact, she bought exactly one.

B. Cross-linguistic variation: The meaning of the plural is by default atoms and sums, as opposed to sums of atoms. But...²

1. there are no (attested) languages that have an inclusive-only understanding, while
2. there are languages that have an exclusive-only understanding.

3.2 Farkas and de Swart (2010): lexical ambiguity

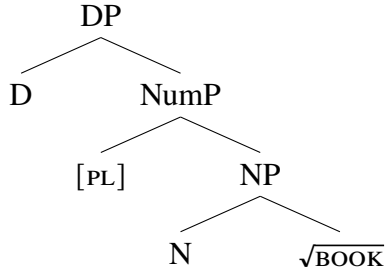
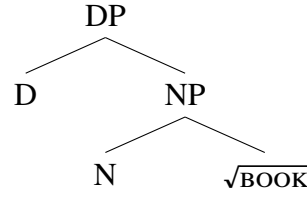
Their point of departure is the opposite of (8), i.e. the Horn (2001) pattern in (18).

(18) Morphologically marked forms are semantically marked, but morphologically unmarked forms are semantically unmarked.

Privative view of markedness: $[F] \sim \emptyset$. (Noyer 1992; Harley and Ritter 2002; Cowper 2005)

Semantically, $[F]$ is characterized by the presence of some property P , \emptyset entails nothing about the presence or absence of P but is used chiefly (although not exclusively) to indicate the absence of P .

²Martí (2020) argues based on the distribution and interpretation of duals that $[\text{PL}]$ must be interpretable.

(19) *books*

 (20) (a) *book*


The interpretation of [PL] is ambiguous.

 (21) a. $\llbracket \text{PL} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \lambda^* P[x \in \text{sum} \cup \text{atom} \wedge^* P(x)]$

 b. $\llbracket \text{PL} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \lambda^* P[x \in \text{sum} \wedge^* P(x)]$

 (22) $\llbracket \text{Lina harvested tomatoes} \rrbracket = \exists x: [x \in \text{sum} \wedge^* \text{tomato}(x)][\text{harvest}(L, x)]$

 (23) $\llbracket \text{Lina didn't harvest tomatoes} \rrbracket = \exists x: [x \in \text{sum} \cup \text{atom} \wedge^* \text{tomato}(x)][\neg \text{harvest}(L, x)]$

Singular nominals have no explicit number feature and are restricted to atomic reference only as a result of the competition with the plural form.

 (24) $\llbracket \text{Lina harvest a tomato} \rrbracket = \exists x: [x \in \text{atom} \wedge^* \text{tomato}(x)][\text{harvest}(L, x)]$

The choice between (21a) and (21b) is determined by a pragmatic mechanism:

 (25) *The Strongest Meaning Hypothesis*

When an expression is assigned a set of interpretations ordered by entailment, choose the strongest element of this set that is compatible with the context.

In upward entailing environments: if it is true that **exclusive**, then it is necessarily true that **inclusive**. But the opposite does not follow.

(26) If Lina harvested two or more tomatoes, it must be the case that she harvested one or more.

In downward entailing environments the entailments are reversed: if it is true that **inclusive**, then it is necessarily true that **exclusive**.

(27) If Lina didn't harvest one or more tomatoes, it must be the case that she didn't harvest two or more either.

The concerns raised by the inclusive-only approaches are dealt away by assuming that [PL] is ambiguous.

The account also has some welcome consequences.

The Strongest Meaning Hypothesis predicts that there are contexts in which the entailing proposition might not be chosen – as long as the entailed proposition is the strongest in that particular context.

This is confirmed in English with examples such as (28): *children/mice* are in an upward-entailing environment but interpreted inclusively.

- (28) a. [Speaker walks into unknown house, and notices toys littering the floor]
There are **children** in this house.
b. [Speaker walks into basement, and notices mouse droppings]
Ah! We have mice!

The opposite situation also exists: exclusive interpretations of plurals in downward entailing environments.

- (29) John may have read *one* book, but I don't think he has read books.

Concern

A. [SG] \neq the absence of plural: We have seen evidence that singular-marking cannot be reduced to the absence of [PL] or the lack of NumP.

3.3 Toquero-Pérez (2024, 2025): Exclusive-only + allosemy

There are also accounts that analyze [PL] as having an exclusive meaning, and the inclusive is derived given certain structural conditions.

Singular and plural are independently required by the syntax: [SG] or [PL] may head NumP.

Plural-marked NPs interpreted inclusively in §2 are in parallel distribution to plural marked NPs with NPI *any*. (Harbour 2016, ch.6: p.149-150), and Ackema and Neeleman (2018, ch.3: p.81-83)

Compare the pairs of sentences:

- (30) a. I didn't see children. (31) a. I saw children.
b. I didn't see **any** children. b. ?? I saw **any** children.

- (32) A: { Did you see children in the park? }
{ Did you see **any** children in the park? }
B: { Yes, I saw one }
{ # No, I saw one }

- (33) a. If you have children, you are welcome to board now.
b. If you have **any** children, you are welcome to board now.
(34) a. [Every [house with **windows** overlooking the ocean]] is overpriced.
b. [Every [house with **any** windows overlooking the ocean]] is overpriced.

Hypothesis: there is a (c)overt NPI that occurs with plurals in downward entailing contexts.

Whenever this (overt or covert) NPI is appropriately licensed, it will be responsible for triggering the inclusive interpretation of the plural.

General rule for the interpretation of plural-marked nouns

- (35) A plural-marked noun is interpreted inclusively ...
a. if it is directly c-commanded by a negative determiner (e.g. *no*) or a properly licensed NPI (e.g. *any*) at LF.
b. Otherwise, it will be interpreted exclusively.
c. Structural description: $D[\{ \text{NEG/ NPI} \}] > \text{PL} > \text{N} \sqrt{\text{ROOT}}$

Assumption: just like morphemes are mapped to a vocabulary item via a series of rules at PF, that take into account the morpho-syntactic contexts and are mediated by the Subset Principle, so is the denotation of morphemes. (Arad 2003; Marantz 2001, 2013; Harley 2014; Wood 2016, 2023)

(36) Vocabulary Insertion rule format

- a. $\alpha[F] \Leftrightarrow X / _\beta$ ‘Map F on α to vocabulary item X in the context of β ’
 b. $\alpha[F] \Leftrightarrow Y$ ‘Map F on α to vocabulary item Y elsewhere’

(37) Meaning Insertion rule format

- a. $\alpha[F] \Leftrightarrow \lambda\sigma \dots / _\beta$ ‘Interpret $\alpha[F]$ as the λ -expression in the context of β ’
 b. $\alpha[F] \Leftrightarrow \lambda\sigma.\lambda\tau \dots$ ‘Interpret $\alpha[F]$ as the λ -expression elsewhere’

The [PL] morpheme has the two alloemes in (38).

(38) Alloemy rules for [PL]

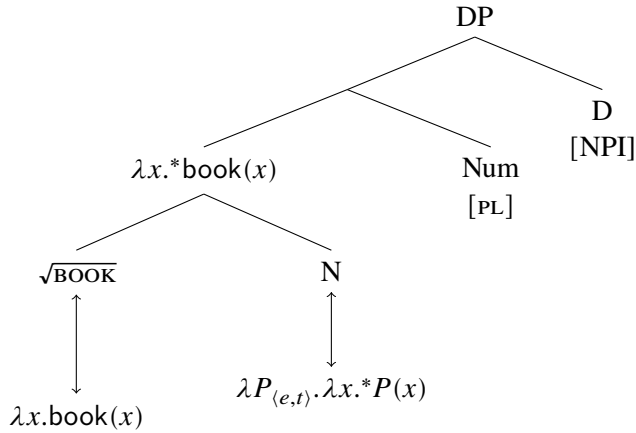
- a. $\text{Num}[\text{PL}] \Leftrightarrow \lambda P.P / _\text{D}[\{\text{NPI} / \text{NEG}\}]$
 b. $\text{Num}[\text{PL}] \Leftrightarrow \lambda P.\lambda x.P(x) \wedge \text{sum}(x)$

The two alloemes which compete for insertion at LF.

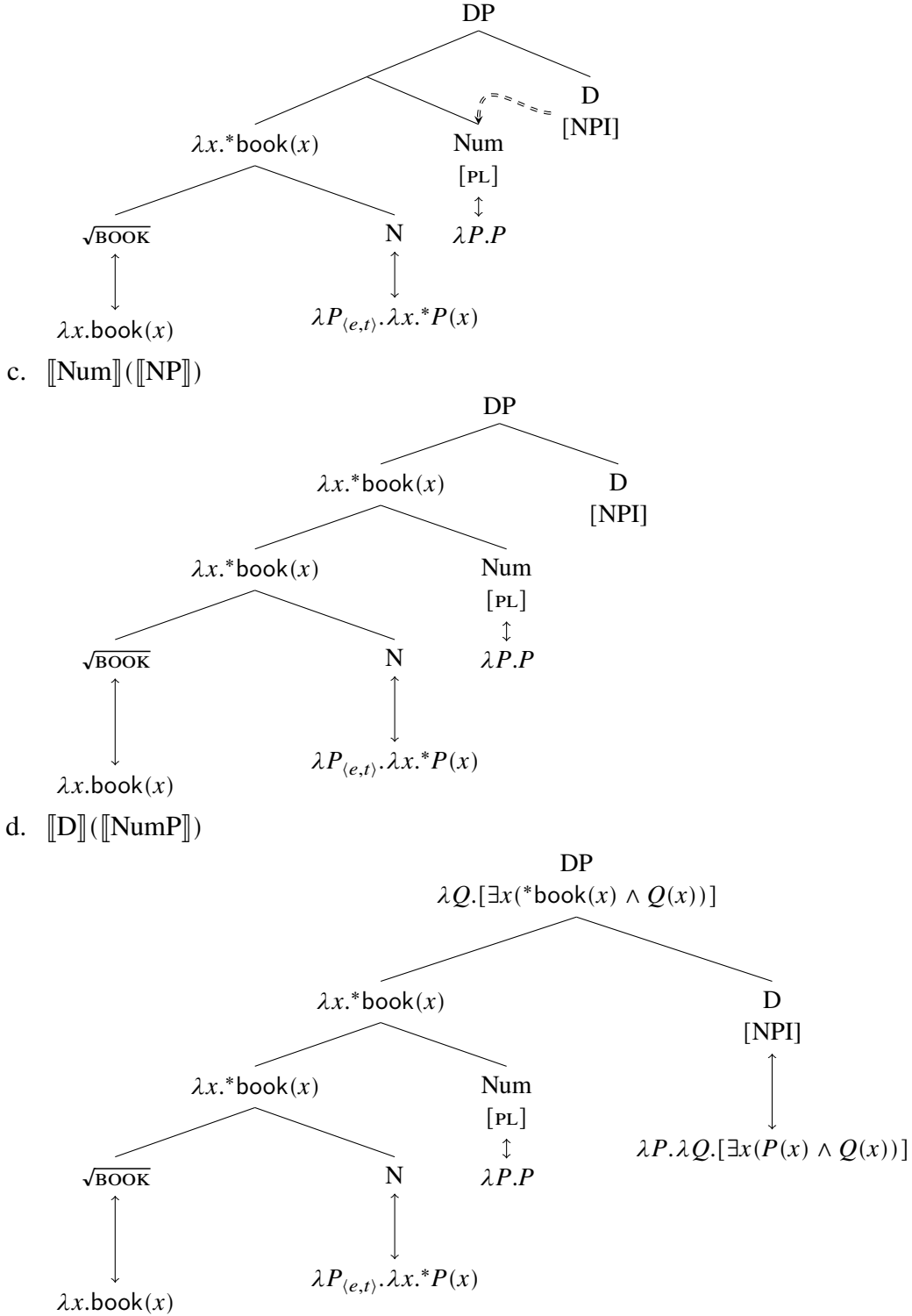
- The elsewhere case in (38b) is the ‘basic’ or ‘elsewhere’ denotation.
- The elsewhere rule will be blocked in favor of the more specific rule in (38a). According to this rule, the denotation of [-atomic] will be that of an identity function.

(39) Semantic derivation of plurals in a downward entailing context

- a. $\llbracket \text{N} \rrbracket (\llbracket \sqrt{\text{BOOK}} \rrbracket)$



- b. D[NPI] triggers alloemy of (38a) on Num[PL]



The account predicts that inclusive interpretations of plurals correlate with NPI licensing.

Potential concerns There are at least two places where the interpretation of (covert/overt) *any* and inclusive plurals seems to diverge.³

³Thanks to Y. Sudo (p.c.) for pointing them out.

A. The scope of *only*: The scope of *only* is an NPI licensing context. We would expect a plural-marked NP to receive an inclusive interpretation, but that is arguably incorrect:

(40) Only John has (any) iPhones.

Exclusive: ‘Only John has 2 or more iPhones’

(40) is wrongly predicted to not imply that ‘John has multiple iPhones’.

B. The nuclear scope of *every/each*: the nuclear scope of universal quantifiers is not an NPI-licensing environment.

Plurals in the scope of *every/each* allow a ‘mixed readings’, not exclusive. (Farkas and de Swart 2010)

(41) Every applicant submitted journal articles as part of their job application.

#Exclusive: Every applicant submitted two or more journal articles.

Mixed: Not every applicant submitted 2 or more journal articles, but at least some applicants did.

4 Where do we stand?

Languages may or may not have a clusivity asymmetry in the understanding of plural nouns.

Within and across languages, the inclusive understanding is usually limited to downward entailing contexts and questions while the exclusive one is found elsewhere. However, we have seen that there are important exceptions to this generalization.

Explaining the asymmetry is not trivial, and regardless of the view one adopts, there seem to be challenges (both empirical and/or conceptual) that need addressing.

Any theory that attempts to explain the asymmetry must not only take into account the inclusive/exclusive distinction, but it must be consistent with the morphological and syntactic facts about number-marking more generally.

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