

# Spanish *Unos* and the Article Hypothesis

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## Abstract

The main claim of this paper is that *unos* is the Spanish plural indefinite article. This claim will be motivated both from a diachronic and a synchronic perspective. I will furthermore motivate why indefinite articles are expected to lack partitive readings and bare nominal arguments needn't be blocked by the existence of an article (cf. Chierchia's Blocking Principle)

## 1 Introduction: the challenge

Spanish has a plural determiner that doesn't allow for proportional readings: *unos* 'some' (Villalta 1994, Gutiérrez-Rexach 2001, Martí 2008). The challenge resides in the fact that non-proportional determiners in general do have a proportional use that surfaces when they are stressed. As shown in (1) *unos* is a noteworthy exception to this generalization:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) ? UNOS estudiantes son abogados.  
    some students are lawyers  
    “SOME students are lawyers.”

(Gutiérrez-Rexach 2001)

Even though this behaviour of *unos* has often been described in the literature there has only been one attempt to explain why *unos* behaves this way: Martí (2008) opposes *unos* to *algunos* 'some' and hypothesizes that *alg-* adds a syntactic / semantic layer responsible for the availability of proportional readings. This however begs the question why only *unos* needs *alg-* for this.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that I am aware of the fact that *unos* can take partitive readings when combined with *otros*. I however assume, with Gutiérrez-Rexach (2001) and Martí (2008) that *unos...otros* is a fixed expression.

## 2 My proposal

I claim *unos* is the Spanish plural indefinite article. The initial motivation for this proposal comes from the fact that in the singular determiner paradigm indefinite articles are in general the only ones that do not allow for partitive readings:

(2) ? A student is a lawyer. (non-generic reading)

Before addressing two of the questions this claim raises I will take a look at corroborating evidence from diachrony. This is the topic of section 3.

## 3 Support from diachrony

In 2. I showed that *unos* patterns (at least partially) with indefinite singular articles in synchrony. In this section I will show that it also patterns with them in diachrony. To do so I will look at two properties that can be associated with the grammaticalization process that gives rise to indefinite articles. It is important to note that I will talk about those indefinite articles that originated in the numeral *one*.

### 3.1 Semantic bleaching

Even though it is never explicitly mentioned the evolution from a numeral to an indefinite article involves semantic bleaching: whereas the numeral does allow for partitive readings, the indefinite article does not. This means that somewhere along their grammaticalization path numerals lose their partitive potential.

If *unos* behaves like indefinite articles in diachrony we expect it to have allowed for partitive readings at the beginning of its grammaticalization process. Showing that this expectation is borne out is not straightforward though. Indeed, given that we have no access to native speaker judgements for Old Spanish it is hard to tell whether the occurrences of *unos* we find have a partitive reading or not. There is a way out though; it has been claimed that one of the ramifications of *unos*' incapacity to allow for partitive readings in synchrony is that it cannot appear in the upstairs D position of (standard) partitives (Gutiérrez-Rexach 2001):

(3) ??? He visto a unos de los familiares de Pedro  
 have seen to some of the relatives of Pedro  
 Intended: 'I saw some of Pedro's relatives.'

(Gutiérrez-Rexach 2001)

Under the assumption that the same should hold in diachrony this gives us a tool to probe the partitive potential of *unos* without having to worry too much about the intended interpretation.

On a first browse through the data of the CORDE corpus I came up with the following example:<sup>2</sup>

- (4) E ellas yendo, se fueron unos de los guardadores  
 And they going themselves went some of the guards  
 a la ciudad  
 to the city  
 "And while they left, some of the guards went to the city."

It is taken from the Manuscrito Escorialense – an Old Spanish Bible manuscript (of around 1260) – and refers to the events that took place on the day Mary and the other women discovered that Jesus' grave was empty. The crucial thing to note is that *unos* appears as the upstairs determiner of a partitive; the interpretation of this example is that some but not all of the guards went to the city (to tell the High Priests what happened).

Convincing as this example might seem it of course does not warrant the conclusion that *unos* allowed for partitive readings at the beginning of its grammaticalization process. Indeed, two potential problems have to be discarded before this conclusion can be drawn. The first is one every corpus study faces: if you only have one example it might actually be an accident. This is further complicated by the fact that any text could contain an accident. What I should be looking for then is texts with multiple examples. The second problem is more subtle: the example in (4) is drawn from a translation and it is not unthinkable that the translator did not respect the grammar of his / her language in order to try to be faithful to the original text. To discard this problem I have to compare the translation to the original text.

The first problem can easily be solved. A more profound browse of the CORDE corpus shows that there are three texts with multiple occurrences of *unos* in the upstairs D position of partitives:

(5)	<i>text</i>	<i>author</i>	<i>number of partitives with unos</i>
	Manuscrito Escorialense (1260)	Anonymous	8
	General Estoria (1270)	Alfonso X	5
	Biblia Reina-Valera (1570)	Casiodoro de Reina	6

This not only shows that the example in (4) is not isolated within Old Spanish but moreover that it is not isolated within one text.

I now turn to the second problem that has become more acute than before given that two of the texts listed in (5) are translations (the Manuscrito Escorialense and the Biblia Reina-Valera). In order to show that the original texts did not influence the translations I will show that identical constructions in the original text not only gave rise to translations involving *unos* but also to translations involving *algunos*. This shows the translator had an alternative and did not hesitate to use it. The hypothesis

<sup>2</sup> CORDE stands for COrpus Diacrónico del Español, is maintained by the Real Academia Española and is freely available online (<http://corpus.rae.es/cordenet.html>).

that he would have used *unos* to be faithful to the original text is thus effectively discarded.

In Table 1 I compare the Manuscrito Escorialense to its original which is assumed to be the Vulgate (the latin translation by Saint Jerome). The table is organized in the following way: in the third column I list the constructions of the original text giving rise to a partitive construction with *unos* or *algunos* in the translation. The fourth column indicates whether *unos* or *algunos* were used.<sup>3</sup>

	Reference	Vulgata	Manuscrito Escorialense
1	Romans 11:17	<i>aliqui + ex + plural</i>	<i>algunos</i>
2	John 9:40	<i>ex + plural</i>	<i>algunos</i>
3	Matthew 9:3	<i>quidam + de + plural</i>	<i>algunos</i>
4	Matthew 12:38	<i>quidam + de + plural</i>	<i>unos</i>
5	Matthew 28:11	<i>quidam + de + plural</i>	<i>unos</i>
6	Mark 2:6	<i>quidam + de + plural</i>	<i>algunos</i>
7	Mark 15:35	<i>quidam + de + plural</i>	<i>algunos</i>
8	Luke 24:24	<i>quidam + ex + plural</i>	<i>unos</i>
9	Acts 15:2	<i>quidam + ex + plural</i>	<i>algunos</i>
10	Acts 23:12	<i>quidam + ex + plural</i>	<i>unos</i>
11	Luke 6:2	<i>quidam + genitive plural</i>	<i>algunos</i>
12	Luke 13:31	<i>quidam + genitive plural</i>	<i>unos</i>
13	Luke 20:27	<i>quidam + genitive plural</i>	<i>unos</i>
14	Luke 20:39	<i>quidam + genitive plural</i>	<i>unos</i>
15	Acts 23:9	<i>quidam + genitive plural</i>	<i>unos</i>
16	Mark 12:13	<i>quosdam + ex + plural</i>	<i>algunos</i>

Table 1: Comparison between Manuscrito Escorialense and Vulgate

What Table 1 shows is that for none of the latin partitive constructions that are recurrent it is possible to predict how it will be translated; both *algunos* and *unos* appear in their translations. It furthermore shows that *unos* is as productive in the translation of partitives as *algunos*; both *unos* and *algunos* are chosen 50 percent of the time. This strongly suggests that the partitive potential of *unos* was comparable to that of *algunos*.

In Table 2 I compare the Biblia Reina-Valera to its original which is assumed to be the Textus Receptus (a Greek translation of the bible by Stephanus dating back to 1550).<sup>4</sup> The table is organized in the same way as Table 1.<sup>5</sup>

What Table 2 shows is that for the only recurrent Greek construction it is not possible to predict how it will be translated; both *algunos* and *unos* appear in its translations. It is interesting to note though that *unos* is far less frequent than *algunos* especially in comparison to what we saw for the Manuscrito Escorialense. This is in no

<sup>3</sup> I used the edition of the Vulgate that is freely available online via <http://www.biblegateway.com>.

<sup>4</sup> I used the edition of the Reina-Valera bible that is freely available online via <http://www.biblegateway.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Note that there is one partitive construction involving *unos* that is missing in the table. This is due to the fact that the original construction was not a partitive construction.

way surprising though; under the assumption that *unos* started to grammaticalize time should have an influence on its partitive potential. Given that the Biblia Reina-Valera is roughly three hundred years younger than the Manuscrito Escorialense it would even be weird if *unos* were to be chosen as frequently as *algunos*.

	Reference	Textus Receptus	Reina-Valera
1	Mark 12:13	<i>tinas</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
2	Acts 21:16	genitive definite plural	algunos
3	Acts 19:13	<i>tines</i> + <i>apo</i> + definite plural	algunos
4	John 7:25	<i>tines</i> + <i>ek</i> + definite plural	unos
5	Matthew 9:3	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
6	Matthew 12:38	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
7	Mark 2:6	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
8	Mark 7:1	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
9	Mark 11:5	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	unos
10	Mark 15:35	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	unos
11	Luke 6:2	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
12	Luke 9:27	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
13	Luke 19:39	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
14	Luke 20:27	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	unos
15	Luke 20:39	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	unos
16	Luke 24:24	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
17	Acts 10:23	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
18	Acts 19:31	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
19	Acts 23:12	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos
20	Romans 11:17	<i>tines</i> + genitive definite plural	algunos

Table 2: Comparison between Textus Receptus und Reina-Valera

From the above I conclude that *unos* allowed for partitive readings at the beginning of its grammaticalization process. Given that it doesn't allow for them anymore and given that the same evolution holds for indefinite articles I furthermore conclude that *unos* patterns (in this respect) with indefinite articles in diachrony. This is the first piece of evidence I draw from diachrony that corroborates my claim about the nature of *unos*.

### 3.2 Frequency

A well-attested fact about items that grammaticalize is that their frequency increases. This is no different for the indefinite article as is shown in Table 3 for its variants *un* and *una*. The data are taken from the Corpus del Español.<sup>6</sup> Most noteworthy is the sudden increase in frequency around the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>6</sup> The Corpus del Español was designed by Mark Davies, is maintained through the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities and Brigham Young University and is freely available online (<http://www.corpusdelespanol.org/>).

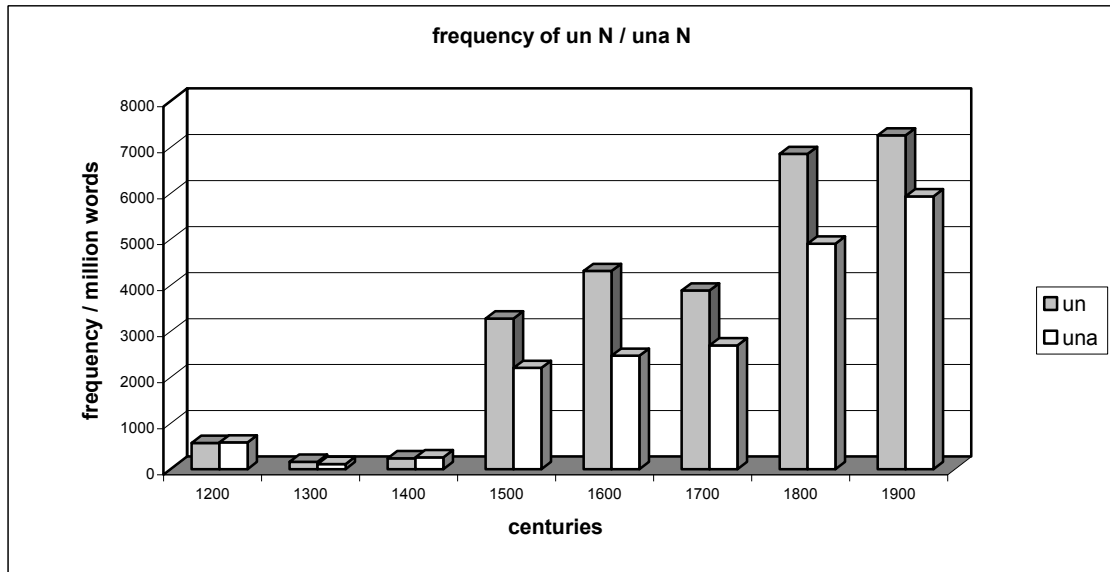


Table 3: Frequency of un / una

Under the assumption that *unos* behaves like indefinite articles in diachrony we expect it to have a similar increase in frequency around the same time. Table 4 shows that this expectation is borne out.

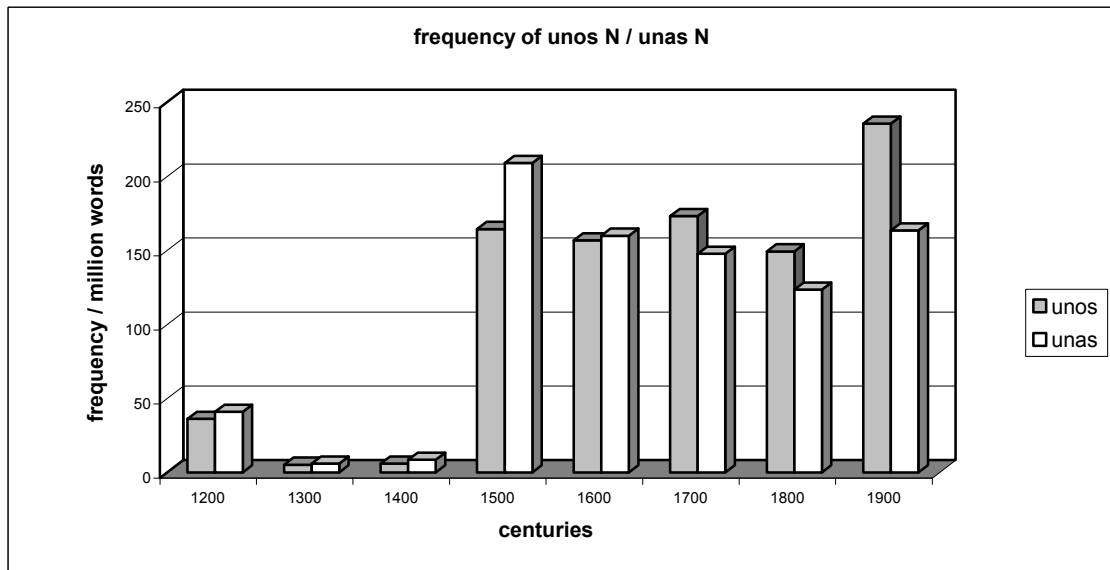


Table 4: Frequency of unos / unas

The frequency data show that *unos* patterns (in this respect) with indefinite articles in diachrony. This is the second piece of evidence I draw from diachrony that corroborates my claim about the nature of *unos*.

### 3.3 Taking stock

In this section I have shown that *unos* patterns with indefinite articles in diachrony in at least two respects: (i) it lost its ability to take on partitive readings, (ii) its frequency increased dramatically around the same time as that of the indefinite article.<sup>7</sup> The similarity is striking and I consider it to be strong support for my claim about the article status of *unos* especially when combined with the synchronic similarity noted in (1) and (2).

In the following section I will consider two of the questions my claim raises.

## 4 Two questions<sup>8</sup>

### 4.1 What is an article ?

In (1) and (2) I noted that *unos* patterns with singular indefinite articles in not allowing for partitive readings. This is a purely empirical observation and the real question that should be asked is the following: what is it that makes the lack of partitive readings of *unos* into an argument in favour of its articlehood? This question can be divided up into two subquestions: (i) what is an article? and (ii) why is it that articles do not allow for partitive readings?

The answer I propose for (i) goes back to Partee (1987): the indefinite singular article is the least marked inverse of the BE type-shift as defined in (6) (“it applies to a generalized quantifier, finds all the singletons therein, and collects their elements into a set”):

$$(6) \quad \lambda \wp [\lambda x [\{x\} \in \wp]]$$

The extension from a singular indefinite article to a plural one is straightforward: instead of having singular individuals we would be having plural individuals.

The answer I propose for (ii) finds its origin in the fact that the BE type-shift ignores any partitive structure: under the assumption that an indefinite article should be the inverse of BE one expects that it should not allow for structure that BE ignores.

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<sup>7</sup> I leave for future research the checking of a third possible similarity: it was noted by Blazer (1979) and Stark (2002) that articles – at the beginning of their grammaticalization process – marked highly persistent discourse referents. Under the assumption that *unos* behaves like indefinite articles in diachrony we would then expect it to have the same kind of use in the beginning of its grammaticalization process.

<sup>8</sup> A question I don’t treat is why *unos* doesn’t allow for event-splitting (see Martí 2008). I leave this for future research but do acknowledge that it is potentially problematic for my analysis.

## 4.2 Why does Spanish allow for bare plural arguments ?

Under the assumption that *unos* is the plural indefinite article we might expect the Blocking Principle in (8) to block the appearance of bare plurals in argument position. As shown in (9) this expectation is not borne out.

- (8) Blocking Principle  
 For any type shifting operation  $\tau$  and any X:  
 $*\tau(X)$   
 if there is a determiner D such that for any set X in its domain,  
 $D(X) = \tau(X)$   
(Chierchia 1998)
- (9) Juan comió bizcochos.  
 Juan ate biscuits  
 “Juan ate biscuits.”

The question (9) raises is whether I can maintain that *unos* is the plural counterpart of the indefinite article if it doesn't pattern with it in blocking bare nominals. The answer I propose is that the facts in (9) are not a problem for my analysis of *unos* and that the Blocking Principle in (8) is too coarse-grained.

### *The gist of my argumentation*

The strongest argument in favour of the Blocking Principle is the complementary distribution of bare singular arguments and indefinite / definite articles across languages. If we take this argument seriously and if it is possible to show that the bare plural and *unos* are in complementary distribution language-internally we can conclude that the Blocking Principle is not violated in (9) but that it needs to be qualified.

In what follows I will (i) identify the dimension along which I assume *unos* and the bare plural can be said to be in complementary distribution, (ii) show that they really are and (iii) give a revised version of the Blocking Principle.

### *The dimension*

Laca & Tasmowski (1994) make an interesting observation: according to them the bare plural has to be replaced by *unos* if one wants to pick up its referent in subsequent discourse. This suggestion can be formally rendered in at least two ways. The first is that bare plurals cannot introduce discourse referents (see Laca 1996, 1999), the second that bare plurals introduce discourse referents that are not salient (i.e. that are not likely to be picked up in subsequent discourse). The choice between these ways can be settled empirically; if it is possible to refer back to a referent that could only have been introduced by a bare plural it is the salience card that has to be drawn. (10) shows that this is indeed the case.

- (10) Encontró **ladrones**; pero no ladrones de buen tono, no ladrones fashionables como José María [...]. Eran ladrones de poco más o menos [...]. (La gaviota, Caballero Fernán)  
 He met **thieves**; but not thieves that are *bon ton*, not fashionable thieves like José María [...]. **They** were thieves and nothing more [...].

The dimension along which *unos* and the bare plural can be said to be in complementary distribution is that of salience: bare plurals introduce non-salient discourse referents whereas *unos* introduces salient discourse referents.

#### *Complementary distribution*

Showing a complementary distribution between two items on the basis of salience is not easy. Indeed, as Dayal (2004) notes for similar facts in Hindi, judgements “are affected by potentially different expectations people can have about the relevance of the entity referred to in the discourse”. There is a way to circumvent this problem though: if we can identify a context that prohibits the subsequent picking up of discourse referents and a context that forces the subsequent picking up of discourse referents we would make the predictions listed in (11).<sup>9</sup>

- (11) a. in a context that prohibits the picking up of discourse referents we expect the bare plural to be the only option  
 b. in a context that forces the picking up of discourse referents we expect *unos* to be the only option

One context we know prohibits the picking up of discourse referents is the scope of negation. (11a) then predicts that *unos* has to scope over negation and function as a PPI. (12) shows that this prediction is borne out :

- (12) A la reunión no asistieron unos profesores. NEG<*unos* \*NEG> *unos*  
 At the meeting not attended some professors  
 “Some professors didn’t attend the meeting.” (Laca 1996)

The identification of a context forcing the picking up of discourse referents is more subtle and depends on a specific analysis of preverbal subjects in Spanish. Zagana (2002) (following work by Contreras (1991) and Olarrea (1996)) claims that Spanish preverbal subjects are adjuncts of a silent left dislocated clitic. The main argument in favour of this analysis is that there needn’t be grammatical agreement between a preverbal subject and its verb:

- (13) Los estudiantes tenemos un alto concepto de nosotros mismos.  
 The students have-1<sup>st</sup>-pl. a high opinion of us- selves  
 “Students, (we) have a high opinion of ourselves.”

<sup>9</sup> It would be more correct to talk about contexts that have an influence on the anaphoric potential of discourse referents that are introduced in them.

The disagreement between *los estudiantes* and *tenemos* can be explained if we assume a silent first person plural clitic that picks up the referent introduced by *los estudiantes*. Under this assumption *los estudiantes* has to be picked up by the silent clitic in order to be interpreted as the subject of the sentence and – more generally – to be interpretable within the sentence at all. This means that the preverbal subject position is one forcing the picking-up of discourse referent. (11b) then predicts that the bare plural should not be allowed to occur in this position. (14) shows that this prediction is borne out:

- (14) \* *Políticos han ocupado el palacio.*  
 Politicians have occupied the palace  
 “Politicians have occupied the palace.”

(Delfitto & Schrotten 1991)

### Conclusion

In what precedes I have shown that the bare plural and *unos* are in complementary distribution in Spanish w.r.t salience. If this language-internal observation is taken as seriously as the cross-linguistic observations that led to the formulation of the Blocking Principle this means that the Blocking Principle should be reformulated as follows:

- (15) Blocking Principle (revised)  
 For any type shifting operation  $\tau$  and any X:  
 \* $\tau(X)$   
 if there is a determiner D such that for any set X in its domain,  
 $D(X) = \tau(X)$   
 and the salience of D(X) is equal to that of  $\tau(X)$

Under this revised version of the Blocking Principle the existence of bare plural arguments is no longer a problem for an analysis that assumes *unos* is the Spanish plural indefinite article.

## 5 General conclusion

The main claim of this paper is that *unos* is the Spanish plural indefinite article. This claim was motivated both from a diachronic and a synchronic perspective. I furthermore motivated why articles are expected to lack partitive readings and bare nominal arguments needn't be blocked by the existence of an article.

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