Plurality Across Languages
Proseminar in Semantics:
Syllabus

1. General Overview

The purpose of this class is serve as a bridge between the introductory graduate semantics courses (610, 620) and the more advanced semantics seminars. Typically, a specific subject is covered in more depth than is typically done in the intro classes, but the discussion is paced at a level appropriate for second- and third-year students.

The subject of this proseminar will be number: it will cover the semantics (and a bit of the syntax) of categories such as ‘singular’, ‘plural’, ‘dual’, etc. across languages. It will spin out from this core area into the related subjects of (i) pluractionality (‘verbal number’), (ii) distributive operators (such as ‘each’), and (iii) reciprocals (such as ‘each other’).
The following is quick outline of the main sections of the course; each is outlined in more detail in the sections below.

(1) **General Course Outline**

   a. **Foundations**
      (i) The Basics of Plurals
      (ii) More on ‘Cumulative’ Readings
   b. **Number Marking (and Kinds) Across Languages**
      (i) The Types of Number Marking
      (ii) Number Marking and the Expression of Kinds Across Languages
   c. **Pluractionals**
   d. **Distributive Markers and the Nature of Distributivity**
   e. **Reciprocals**

2. **Course Requirements**

2.1 **Short Assignments**

As this is a bridge between the intro courses and the advanced seminars, it is critical that I receive ‘feedback’ regarding my presentation of the material (particularly its pace). For this reason, I will give you a few short assignments throughout the term. The point of these exercises will not so much be to challenge you, but to simply confirm that I have us all ‘on the same page’. Relatedly, you are strongly, enthusiastically encouraged to interact with Barbara and I as much as possible. Please arrange meetings with us, chat with us, or e-mail with us whenever the spirit moves you (and especially if you feel you are having trouble with anything…)

2.2 **Team Paper Presentations**

There will be two sets of ‘team presentations’: one in approximately mid-October, and one in approximately mid-November. Each team will present one of the papers indicated in the course reading list below. Please select your teams (of two) for the first presentation by next Friday.

For the first round of presentations, you are asked to choose one of the available papers in either Section 2 (Number Marking) or Section 3 (Pluractionality). Please decide upon a paper to present (for by the end of **September 21**).

For the second round of presentations, you are asked to choose one of the papers in either Section 4 (Distributive Markers) or Section 5 (Reciprocals). Please decide upon your teams for the second round of presentations and the paper you will present by **October 21st**.

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1 In this context, ‘one paper’ means either one ‘long paper’ (~40 pages) or **two** short papers (~20 pages).
2.3 Final Paper and Presentation

Each of you will be required to write a final paper for the course. You should meet with me regarding the topic of your final paper by October 31st. I will also arrange to meet with you at various points afterwards, to assist with the progress of your paper.

Towards the end of the semester, each of you will also give a short presentation of your final paper (20 minutes, with 10 minutes for questions). We will settle on the exact dates of these presentations as the time approaches.

General Piece of Advice: MEET WITH US!
At any point in the semester, please meet with Barbara and I regarding any issues at all, particularly if you are having any kind of difficulties with the course. We are also very happy to discuss anything at all, especially any interesting puzzles you happen to note along the way.

3. Various Dates of Interest

September 21st: Have paper for first presentation chosen
October 12th: No class (Monday schedule)
October 14th: Approximate date that first presentations begin.
October 21st: Have paper for second presentation chosen.
October 31st: Topic for final paper due
November 10th: CLASS (Thursday schedule on a Wednesday)
November 11th: No class (Veterens’ Day)
November 16th: Approximate date that second presentations begin.
November 25th: No class (Thanksgiving Break)
December 2nd: Approximate date that final presentations begin.
December 9th: Final class
December 20th: Final papers due
December 27th: Final grades due

2 Unless you are ‘two-papering’ the course, in which case, let me know by October 31st. If you are two-papering the course, I will ask that you present some other, short paper from the reading list as your final presentation.
4. More Detailed Overview of Course Content

There are two very general goals of this proseminar. The first is to introduce students to various interrelated issues in the semantics of ‘number’, broadly construed. The second is to introduce students to the ways in which some of these issues are informed by in-depth semantic examination of (relatively) understudied languages, particularly non-Indo-European languages.

Autobiographical Aside:
These two goals for the course reflect my two main motivations in designing this course:

(i) I’ve always loved plurals, and have always wanted to have more systematic training in them.

(ii) I’ve found that in the languages I’m most interested in:

a. The best (or only) test for c-command are ‘bound readings’ of pronouns.

b. The only way to truly obtain ‘bound pronouns’ is to use reciprocals and/or pronouns in the scope of a distributive operator (‘each’) (In many languages, there aren’t clear cases of inherently quantificational DPs.)

c. However, in the languages I’m most interested in, each of these structures have ‘quirks’ that are not familiar from English or related languages.

d. These ‘quirks’ relate, invariably, to so-called ‘pluractionality’ or ‘verbal number’.

e. Happily, there is a growing literature on the relationship between pluractionality, distributivity, and reciprocality, one that is based largely upon just such ‘quirks’ in various under-studied languages.

f. Thus, if you’re going to ever be looking at ‘bound pronouns’ in any language, you should really know a bit about pluractionals, distributives and reciprocals across languages.

(iii) I’ve found that in the languages I’m most interested in:

a. DPs are not obligatorily marked for number, and there seem to be interesting constraints on when you can mark a DP for number. Moreover, this tends to be an incredibly common system across the world.

b. Thus, it’s important for us to begin to develop and evaluate theories of number marking across languages. (And, since the constraints on such marking relate to the meaning of the DP, these should be semantic theories...)
In the following sections, I say a bit about each of the main units of the course.

4.1 Section 1: Foundations

This unit divides into two subsections. The first covers a variety of general issues in the semantics of plurals. The second provides some further background into the (enormous) literature on ‘cumulative readings’.

4.1.1 The Basics of Plurals

We begin with some broad (but relatively shallow) coverage of some of the major ideas and debates in the semantics of plurals. We will cover one common (but not universal) analysis of plural NPs, one that stems from the seminal work of Godehard Link. This system will lead us through some basic analyses of (i) plural NPs, (ii) plural definites, and (iii) plural indefinites (especially numerals). We will also get our first glimpse of the issues surrounding so-called collective, distributive, and cumulative readings of sentences containing plural DPs. We will also briefly examine the controversies surrounding the need for so-called ‘groups’ in the analysis of plurals, and alternative approaches making use of ‘covers’.

Following this, we will briefly examine an alternative approach to the semantics of plural DPs, one developed by Uli Sauerland. Though still relatively new and ‘untested’, this approach seems to be gaining in popularity, and is of direct relevance to some of our later discussions concerning the ‘markedness’ of plurality.

Required Reading:


Optional Further Reading:

Other Formal Treatments of Plurality


Schwarzschild, Roger. 1996. Pluralities. Dordrecht: Kluwer. (Chapters 1, 2)

The Semantics of ‘All’
Linguistics and Philosophy 26: 129-184. (Sections 1 – 4)

On Whether Plural Extensions Contain Atoms
Semantics and Pragmatics 3: 1-54.

On Downward Entailing Quantifiers with Plural NPs.
Hackl, Martin. 2000. Comparative Quantifiers. PhD Dissertation. MIT. (Chapters 1, 2)

4.1.2 More on Cumulative Readings
The second subsection of the first unit concerns sentences like (2). Much of the literature regarding plurals concerns the meaning(s) of sentences like this:

(2) Two TA’s graded 30 exams.

As has long been noted, sentences like (2) seem to have rather weak truth-conditions, in that they can be read as true in a wide variety of situations (two TA’s separately grading 30 each; two TA’s jointly grading a total of 30; two TA’s separately grading 15, etc.). There are many proposals regarding (a) how many separate readings sentences like (2) truly have, and (b) how to generate those readings. This is an enormous subject, and we will not wade too deeply into it, but some familiarity with the key issues here will be important to certain of our later sections (particularly the work on reciprocals). Therefore, an examination of some of the primary works in this area will give us all the tools necessary for the material to follow.

Required Reading:


Optional Further Reading:

**Further Exposition of Scha (1984)**

**On the Relationship Between Cumulative Readings and ‘Groups’**

**On the Relationship Between Cumulative Readings and Event Semantics**

**On the Semantics of Collective Adverbials (‘Together’)**

**Further Possible Constraints on Cumulative Interpretations**

### 4.2 Number Marking (and Kinds) Across Languages

The second main unit of the course concerns the variety of number marking across languages. One of our main guides here will be Greville Corbett’s landmark typological study (Corbett 2000). As in the first unit, this unit divides into two subunits. The first concerns the existence and semantics of numbers beyond merely ‘singular’ and ‘plural’. The second, more substantial subunit, concerns patterns in the marking of number across languages. It also concerns the highly influential work of Gennaro Chierchia (1998, 2010), and various critical responses to it.

#### 4.2.1 The Types of Number Marking

This subsection will begin with a tour of the various categories of ‘number’ across languages, with Corbett (2000: Chapter 2) as our guide. Following this, we will look at two (of the remarkably few) works analyzing the semantics of categories beyond ‘singular’ and ‘plural’.

**Required Reading:** (Papers marked with an asterisk may be chosen for class presentations)

4.2.2 Number Marking and Expression of Kinds Across Languages

Besides the categories of number, languages also differ in the environments where they permit/require number to be marked. In some languages, number marking does not exist. In others, it is generally optional, while in others still, it is optional only on certain NPs, with other NPs either requiring or disallowing number marking.

We begin this subsection with a tour of these cross-linguistic facts, as provided by Corbett (2000: Chapters 3-4). We then turn to a highly influential theory of the cross-linguistic variation in number marking, Chierchia (1998). We immediately follow this with an examination of Chierchia (2010), which revises some (but not all) of the key proposals of Chiercha (1998).

Finally, we examine various in-depth, published critiques of Chierchia (1998), principally his theory of the nature of number marking and the mass/count distinction in languages that do not have obligatory number marking. We will consider the extent to which Chierchia (2010) is still subject to these criticisms. We will also consider the nature of language types discussed by Corbett (2000) that do not obviously fall into the typology theories of Chierchia and others.

Required Reading:


Optional Further Reading:

**Further Work on Bare Singulars and Variation in Number Marking and Reference to Kinds**

**Other Work on Number and Kind-Reference in Classifier Languages**

### 4.3 Pluractionals

Thus far, our discussion of number has followed the general trend of focusing on cases where the category ‘number’ operates upon a nominal argument. However, it has long been recognized that languages sometimes allow number to operate on *verbal* arguments. These constructions are sometimes referred to as ‘verbal number’ or (more commonly) ‘pluractionals’. They differ from mere ‘number agreement’ in that the number is semantically interpreted on the verb, and has the result that the sentence in question asserts the existence of ‘multiple events’ of a given type.

We’ll begin the third unit of the course by touring the general phenomenon of pluractionals, and how they vary across languages. As before, our tour guide here will be Corbett (2000: Chapter 8). Following this, we will examine the influential semantic theory of pluractionals developed by Lasersohn (1995: Chapter 13). We will then examine a range of specific ‘case studies’, work that provides formal semantic analysis of pluractionals in a variety of languages. These readings will also begin to hint at the connection between pluractionality, distributivity and Aktionsart.
Finally, we will take a look at cases in English where (amazingly) NP modifiers seem to function as pluractionals. As we will see, there will be interesting connections between this seemingly esoteric English structure, and the phenomenon of distributives and reciprocals.

Required Reading:


Optional Further Reading:

*Further Applications of Lasersohn (1995) to Other Languages*


*Further Work on Event Quantifiers Inside DPs*


4.4 Distributive Markers and the Nature of Distributivity

As noted above, a sentence like (2), repeated below, seems to possess a number of readings.

(2) Two TA’s graded 30 exams.

Under one widely discussed reading, the sentence is true if two TA’s each graded 30 exams (for a total of 60 exams graded). This ‘distributive’ reading of the sentence has been examined in a wide variety of literature. We’ll begin by reviewing one rather influential account, that of Roger
Schwarzschild (1996: Chapter 5). This account develops in detail the notion that so-called ‘covers’ play an important role in the semantics of these distributive readings.

From this point, we will look outwards to a number of case studies exploring distributive readings in a variety of languages. As we will see, in many languages, these readings require a particular morpho-syntax to appear in the sentence, one that can sometimes be difficult to analyze under earlier, classic analyses of these readings. Moreover, we will also see that in many languages, the markers employed for such distributive readings have a broader use, one that is intimately connected with pluractionality.

These cross-linguistic facts raise important questions regarding classic analyses of distributive readings in languages such as English. Relatedly, we will examine recent work that compares the semantics of such ‘pluractional distributives’ to distributive operators like *each* in English.

**Required Reading:**


**Further Optional Reading:**

* **Behavior of the Particle ‘Je’ in German (Parallels to Korean ‘-ssik’)**

4.5 Reciprocals

The final unit of our seminar will concern the syntax and semantics of reciprocal markers such as *each other* in English. As we will see, the study of reciprocals unites most of the material discussed thus far: cumulativity, distributivity, and pluractionality.

We will begin with a tour of the forms of reciprocal marking across languages. Our guides here will be the recent works of Koenig & Gast (2008), Evans (2008), and Siloni (2008). This work will introduce us to the key typological and semantic distinction between so-called ‘nominal’ and ‘verbal’ strategies for marking reciprocals.

Following this, we will begin by examining several landmark works in the semantics of English reciprocals: Heim *et al.* (1991), Sternefeld (1998) and Beck (2001). A key issue in the discussion here is the extent to which the semantics of reciprocals is crucially tied to a ‘bipartite’ syntactic structure, an issue that is of direct relevance to our subsequent cross-linguistic explorations.

Following this, we will examine a number of case studies analyzing the semantics of reciprocal markers in a variety of languages. Most of the cases discussed center on so-called ‘verbal reciprocals’, and we will examine the connection between these constructions and pluractionals. In this connection, we will also examine certain general treatments of reciprocal verbs, particularly the work of Bruening (2006) and Rubinstein (2009).

Required Reading:


* Rubinstein, Aynat. 2009. “Groups in the Semantics of Reciprocal Verbs.” In Schardl, Anisa and Martin Walkow (eds), Proceedings of NELS 38. Amherst, MA: GLSA

Optional Further Reading:

**On the Various Readings that Reciprocals Allow For**


**On Polysemy of Reciprocal Marking (Reflexives, Middles, Comitative, Pluractionals)**


