

# snippets

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# A developmental asymmetry between the singular and plural

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Semantic theories of the plural aim to capture the observation that plural morphology is often associated with a ‘more than one’ meaning; (1a), for example, usually conveys (1b). This multiplicity inference typically disappears in downward-entailing environments; (2a) is not equivalent to the negation of (1b), but rather is interpreted along the lines of (2b).

- (1) a. Elliott read books.  
b. Elliott read more than one book.
- (2) a. Elliott didn’t read books.  
b. Elliott didn’t read a (single) book.

According to Sauerland (2003), agreement features such as the singular feature express presuppositions that are interpreted in a  $\phi$  head that takes DP as its complement. The SINGULAR feature in particular expresses the presupposition that its complement refers to a single atomic entity, while the PLURAL feature is presuppositionless:

- (3)  $\llbracket \text{SINGULAR} \rrbracket(x)$  is defined only if  $\#x = 1$   
 $\llbracket \text{SINGULAR} \rrbracket(x) = x$  wherever it is defined
- (4)  $\llbracket \text{PLURAL} \rrbracket(x)$  is always defined  
 $\llbracket \text{PLURAL} \rrbracket(x) = x$  wherever it is defined

To capture the distribution of the plural, Sauerland invokes *Maximize Presupposition* (Heim 1991): between two alternative morphemes, the one with the stronger presupposition must be used wherever that presupposition is satisfied. Whenever the presupposition of the singular is satisfied, then, the singular, and not the plural, must be used.

Developmental studies have investigated plural meanings in children as young as 20 months using preferential looking paradigms; children are invited to, e.g., “Look at the blicket(s)!” when faced with a picture of a single novel entity and a picture of a plural novel entity (Kouider et al. 2006). Knowledge of the plural meaning reportedly emerges earlier than that of the singular (Davies et al. 2019), with 20–24-month-olds performing better than chance on plurals but not on the singular (Arias-Trejo et al. 2014; Davies et al. 2017). As Arias-Trejo et al. (2014) point out, a general bias for ‘plural’ displays containing more items (Carey 1978; Jolly and Plunkett 2008) cannot fully capture the data: children reportedly showed a significant *increase* in their looks to the plural target *beyond their baseline preference* in response to plural morphology, but did not shift from the baseline in response to the singular.

The developmental asymmetry between the singular and plural poses an interesting puzzle for semantic theories. In a way, Sauerland’s theory makes the presuppositional singular more complex than the non-presuppositional plural; perhaps children acquire the presuppositionless item before

the presuppositional one. On the other hand, without the presupposition, there is no competition between the two forms; prior to acquiring the singular presupposition, children might thus be expected to perform at chance on both.

An alternative explanation, raised by Arias-Trejo et al. (2014), is that children might view both displays as compatible with the singular, singling out an individual object from either display. As an anonymous reviewer points out, perhaps children treat the singular as entailing, rather than presupposing, a cardinality of one, leading them to distinguish the singular and plural in this respect. To determine children's initial interpretations of the singular and plural, it may prove fruitful to examine embedded environments, as has been done for slightly older children (e.g., Sauerland et al. 2005; Tieu et al. 2014; Renans et al. 2018).

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