

Plurality and Determinancy in Western Armenian

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Data from Western Armenian have been taken as a touchstone in several influential works on number and the structure of nominals (Borer, 2005; Bale et al., 2010). Western Armenian (WA) has the remarkable property of utilizing bare singulars and bare plurals, while at the same time, the use of the plural appears to be rigidly exclusive (Bale and Khanjian, 2014), unlike the use of the plural in English (see Sauerland et al. 2005 among many others.) This system contrasts sharply with many more familiar Western European number systems and thus its existence is a critical data point for theories attempting to explicate cross-linguistic variation in the syntax and semantics of number marking. We find through fieldwork a complex landscape of interspeaker variation concerning the bare singular and plural, yet still find a robust effect of interaction between referentiality and plurality.

Background: Controversy in the Literature The distribution of bare nouns in Western Armenian, both syntactically and semantically, is a point of controversy in the literature although, to our knowledge, this has never been addressed. According to much of the literature on Western Armenian, the use of the bare singular, as in (1), is highly restricted in its syntactic occurrence. Bare singulars are reported not to be grammatically acceptable in subject position, at least for transitives and unergatives (Donabédian, 1993; Sigler, 1996). According to Sigler (1996), bare plurals are also unable to appear in external subject positions, that is, only licit in subject position of unaccusative or stative/location verbs. These judgements accord with the prescriptive rules of WA and what are given in textbook discussions of the grammar of WA (Samuelian, 1989). On the other hand, Bale and Khanjian (2014) give examples of bare singular and plurals in subject position, implying that they are grammatically unrestricted for some speakers, as shown in (2).

- (1) maro-n tuz g-ude- \emptyset from Sigler (1996, ex. 50a.)
Maro-DEF fig IMP-eat-3SG
'Maro eats figs'
- (2) Dəgha vaze-ts from Bale and Khanjian (2014, ex. 3)
boy(SG) run-PST
'One or more boys ran'

The contrast between analyses for which the syntactic occurrence is restricted or not corresponds also to a contrast in semantic interpretation of the bare singular. Works such as Donabédian (1993) and Sigler (1996) have taken pains to describe a peculiar semantic effect of using the bare singular: while arguing against an incorporation analysis or as a generic/kind reading, the use of the bare singular is argued to refer to the "property of being N" or to "a nonspecific and non-countable individual(s) of type N" (Sigler, 1996, p. 14) ("une forme qualitative, et non référentielle", Donabédian 1993). In contrast, the use of the plural is asserted to require a discourse status of specific or higher. On the other hand, Bale and Khanjian (2014) treat bare singulars as in (2) as equivalent to an indefinite use unspecified for number ("a boy/some boys ran") with no further restrictions. Thus, a second question to address for the data in WA is whether the bare singular is simply unspecified for number or has a more semantically restricted designation.

Another data point we address is the combination between numerals and nouns. Bale and Khanjian (2014) assert that numerals may combine with singular or plural nouns and this is simply optional, as shown in their example in (3). Yet, according to much of the literature (Donabédian, 1993; Sigler, 1996; Khanjian, 2013), whether numerals combine with singular or plural nouns corresponds to a difference in interpretation, that is, whether the individual units are distinguishable and salient or not.

- (3) a. Yergu dəgha vaze-ts
two boy(SG) run-PST
'Two boys ran'
- b. Yergu dəgha-ner vaze-ts-in
two boy-PL run-PST-3PL

We now turn to our investigation after discussing WA’s language situation and interspeaker variation. **Interspeaker Variation in Western Armenian:** Linguistic studies on Western Armenian often refer to “Standard Western Armenian” or SWA. However, there are many reasons to expect a lot of variation between speakers of WA. WA is spoken in a worldwide diaspora; all speakers of WA are multilingual, speaking at least one local language in addition to WA. Moreover, current speakers of WA are descended from speakers of a wide variety of Armenian dialects, many of which were probably not mutually intelligible; others were primarily speakers of Turkish, not WA. In some cases, WA speakers are only one generation removed from speakers of WA dialects or Turkish. For many WA speakers, especially older speakers, adherence to the prescriptive rules of SWA make it difficult to access the speakers’ intuitions about semantics or grammaticality of bare singulars and plurals.

We assess the variation through in-depth informant work with 10 fluent speakers of Western Armenian. First, we have found variation in acceptability of bare singulars and plurals in different positions. While the majority of speakers from whom we have data rate bare singulars as unacceptable or awkward in subject position and sometimes in object position, there are speakers who do seem to accept bare singulars in any position. Thus, both sides of the controversy appear to be represented in our informant population. As to the interpretation and acceptability with numerals, our fieldwork shows an even more complicated picture than reported in the literature: Some speakers only find numeral + singular noun construction grammatically acceptable, not the numeral + plural noun construction, while other speakers report the exact opposite judgments. The prescriptive rule for WA is that only the numeral + singular noun construction is acceptable. Finally, some speakers accept numerals with both singular and plural nouns.

Analysis: Despite the variability in judgements across speakers, our data indicate three types of WA speakers: (I) speakers who – in accordance with prescriptive grammar – reject bare singulars in external argument position but require them with numerals, (II) speakers who reject bare singulars in external argument position and with numerals, requiring a plural noun, and (III) speakers who accept bare singulars in all positions and also both singular and plural nouns with numerals (corresponding to the judgements of Bale and Khanjian 2014).

Data from Group I and II provide support, both in their acceptability judgments and comments given, for the analysis of the bare singular as not countable and either non-referential or weakly referential. Group III support the unrestricted interpretations as found in Bale and Khanjian (2014). We observe a clear relation between these nominal syntax and semantics of these two populations: Group III’s judgements are semantically weakened or “bleached” in comparison to Groups I and II, a plausible effect of the intense contact present in the language situation of Western Armenian.

Implications for Cross-Linguistic Constraints on the Meanings of Nominals: Amidst the interspeaker variation, we still find clear support across all three groups for the position taken by Donabédian (1993) and Sigler (1996) that the bare singular is used in weakly referential (non-specific) contexts, contrasting with the plural which requires specific or higher discourse salience. In the final portion of the paper, we argue that interaction between referentiality status and occurrence of plurality, while little discussed, is cross-linguistically robust. Comparing WA with several other languages in terms of the referential accessibility hierarchy, shown in (4) (see Keenan and Comrie 1977 i.a.), we show that different languages restrict occurrence of plurality to different levels of the hierarchy. To exemplify, while WA requires an environment of specific or higher, in Aari (Omotic; Afroasiatic) plurals are restricted to definite environments or higher (Corbett, 2000), and Japanese *-tati* can occur only with proper names and pronouns (and human nouns) (Nakanishi and Tomioka, 2004).

- (4) Accessibility Hierarchy: non-specific < specific < definite < proper name < pronoun

As such, the rather particular semantic restrictions on the use of the bare singular and plural in Western Armenian find a natural place in a broader cross-linguistic landscape.

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