

Workshop on impersonal human pronouns

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Binding properties of impersonal human pronouns in generic and episodic contexts ¹

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Contents

1	The definition of "impersonal"	2
2	Impersonal human pronouns	3
2.1	Impersonal human pronouns and other human impersonal constructions . . .	3
2.2	Properties of impersonal human pronouns	5
3	The data	6
3.1	Defining properties of the pronouns examined	6
3.2	Semantic properties	8
3.2.1	Generic and episodic readings	8
3.2.2	Semantic number	8
3.2.3	Anaphora	9
3.2.4	Bound possessives	10
3.3	Defectivity and suppletion	12
4	The analysis	12
4.1	Anaphora	13
4.2	Bound possessives	14

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1 The definition of "impersonal"

For a detailed discussion of the constructions covered under the term IMPERSONAL see Siewierska (2008a); Creissels (2008).

- (1) Characterization of IMPERSONAL Siewierska (2008a, p.2)
 - a. structural point of view: lack of a canonical subject
 - b. functional point of view: agent defocusing
- (2) lack of a canonical subject
 - a. includes meteorological subjects
 - b. includes "feeling" constructions *mir ist kalt* "me.DAT is cold"
 - c. includes constructions with quirky subjects
 - d. includes subjectless constructions
- (3) agent defocusing
 - a. excludes meteorological subjects /feeling /quirky subjects
 - b. if there is no overt subject the criterion of agent defocusing does not clearly draw the frontier between impersonals and passives (Blevins, 2003)
 - c. the problem of identifying passives vs. impersonals is particularly clear in the large literature on constructions with *se/si* in Romance. See Cinque (1988) for an analysis in terms of impersonal subject clitic for *si* and Dobrovie-Sorin (1998) for arguments against such an analysis and in favour of a passive *si*.
- (4) Semantic and morphological properties of impersonal subjects Siewierska (2008a)
 - a. human vs. inanimate
 - b. person/ number/ gender features
 - c. inclusion of speaker / hearer
 - d. generic vs. existential readings
 - e. cognitive accessibility of its referent

2 Impersonal human pronouns

- I focus on impersonal human pronouns here.
- The impersonal human pronouns considered here share three fundamental properties:

- (5) a. they only refer to humans
- b. they allow generic readings (unlike indefinites like *someone*)
- c. they are grammatically singular 3rd person (excluding 3pl and 2sg cases)

- So I differ from McCloskey (2007) in not including the Irish autonomous forms here. McCloskey proposes to treat autonomous forms on a par with impersonal human pronouns despite the difference wrt to [+human] interpretation: Inanimate causes apply routinely to the Irish autonomous form: (ex 36a/b in McCloskey (2007))

- (6) a. Raiceáladh ar chósta na Síne é tráth
wreck[PAST-AUT] on coast the[GEN] China[Gen] him time
‘He was wrecked on the coast of China once.’
- b. tháinig lá millteanach gaoithe móire agus
come[PAST] day terrible wind[GEN] great[GEN] and
rinneadh smionagair den cholaíste adhmaid
make[PAST-AUT] little-pieces of-the college wood[GEN]
‘There came a day of terrible storms and the wooden college was smashed to pieces.’

- I will contrast the properties of impersonal pronouns in English, German, French, Somali, Spanish and Yiddish.

2.1 Impersonal human pronouns and other human impersonal constructions

- In grammars one often finds explanations like the following:

- (7) "impersonal pronoun like *man, on, they* comparable to impersonal uses of *you*."

- So why exclude impersonal 3pl and 2sg here?
- There are **formal and semantic differences** between the different types of expression (for a discussion of other impersonal strategies see Siewierska (2008b), for *si* see Cinque (1988)):

(8) **generic/ episodic contexts**

- a. impersonal uses of 2sg are restricted to generic contexts
- b. 3pl and the impersonal human pronoun proper in the same language often differ wrt to generic/episodic contexts,
 - i. see Hoekstra (2010) for West Frisian *men*,
 - ii. see Cabredo Hofherr (2003) for Spanish 3pl and below for Spanish *uno* and
 - iii. English *they/ one*:
 - they* said on the radio it would rain today.
 - one* said on the radio it would rain today.

(9) **overt vs. null pronouns**

- a. in Spanish impersonal uses of 2sg allow lexical subject pronouns in Spanish while 3pl do not (Hernanz, 1990b,a)
- b. 3pl impersonal pronoun-constructions can be null in languages that do not allow 3rd person anaphoric subjects (Modern Hebrew, Russian)
- c. but some languages allow generic readings (though not episodic readings) of lexical 3pl Cardinaletti and Starke (1999) (cited after Siewierska 2008b)

(10) **politeness**

- a. impersonal uses of 2sg interact with politeness forms (Fr. *tu/ vous*; Ru. *ty/ vy*)
- b. Kitagawa and Lehrer (1990, p.755): Japanese and Korean have too much lexical (honorific) information on the pronouns (no closed class of pronouns) → no impersonal use of 2sg.
Notice that the inverse is not true: In Farsi have closed set of pronouns but no 2sg impersonal (p. 755) (ie closed set of pronouns does **not** imply impersonal 2sg ok Kitagawa and Lehrer (1990, p.755)).

(11) **inclusion of speaker/hearer**

3pl impersonal pronoun constructions exclude the speaker and hearer (English, French, Spanish, German)

- There are also intriguing properties that impersonal human and impersonal uses of 3pl share:

- (12) a. in their **episodic** uses both types exclude unaccusatives and passives
- b. in their **generic** uses there is no restriction against derived subjects
(see Cinque 1988 for French *on* and Italian *si*,
Jaeggli 1986 for Spanish 3pl, Zifonun 2000 for German *man*)

2.2 Properties of impersonal human pronouns

- Impersonal human pronouns have a number of idiosyncratic properties

- (13) **Anaphora** (cf section 2.2.3)
 - a. Impersonal pronouns, unlike existential pronouns like *someone*, cannot be taken up by a (lexical) 3sg (or 3pl) pronoun.
Someone_j said that he_j had enjoyed the party.
Everone_j said that they_j / he_j had enjoyed the party.
 - b. For co-reference, the impersonal pronouns need to be repeated, (this is impossible for existential pronouns like *someone/everyone*).
Someone_j said that someone_{*j/k} had enjoyed the party.
Everone_j said that everyone_{*j/k} had enjoyed the party.
- (14) **Bound possessives:** (cf section 2.2.4)
 - a. Existential readings of impersonal pronouns in French and German are not compatible with bound possessives (generic readings are ok).
 - b. The impersonal pronoun in Somali is not compatible with bound possessives (neither in episodic nor in generic readings).
- (15) **Limited syntactic distribution: defectivity vs suppletion** (cf section 2.3)
 - a. Some impersonal pronouns are described as only having a nominative form (French *on*, Yiddish *men*, Prince 2006)
 - b. Other impersonal pronouns have suppletive forms (German nom. *man*, acc. *einen*, dat *einem*, Zifonun 2000, for West Frisian see Hoekstra 2010)
 - c. **Problem:**
Substitution by semantically close constructions is very common:
When **one** goes in there they tell **you** to come back later.
How can we distinguish substitution and suppletion?

- Here I examine the impersonal human pronouns in German, French and Somali² *man/ on/ la* drawing comparisons with English, Spanish and Yiddish *one/ uno/ men*.
- I propose an analysis for the properties **Anaphora** and for **Bound possessives**.

- (16) a. I propose that impersonal pronouns are comparable to personal pronouns in their binding behaviour across sentence boundaries: they have to be repeated.
- b. I propose that the binding differences between episodic and generic uses of the impersonal pronoun is due to the featural makeup: generic pronouns in some languages contain a lexical generic operator which is absent in the impersonal pronoun that appears in episodic sentences.

3 The data

3.1 Defining properties of the pronouns examined

- Obligatorily human referent.

- (17) a. # Dans cette basse-cour, **on** doit pondre 2 oeufs par jour. (Fr)
- b. # In diesem Hühnerhof sollte **man** 2 Eier pro Tag legen. (Ge)
- c. # En este gallinero **uno** debe poner 2 huevos por día. (Sp)
- d. # In this hen-house **one** should lay 2 eggs a day.
- e. # Albaab-ka waa **la** xir-ay.
 door-det WAA LA close-3ms.pst
 The door has been closed by somebody.³ (Som)

- Generic readings

- (17) a. **On** doit se laver les dents deux fois par jour. (Fr)
- b. **Man** soll sich zweimal am Tag die Zähne putzen. (Ge)
- c. **Uno** debe lavarse los dientes dos veces por día. (Sp)

²The impersonal human subject clitic in Somali is an exceptional property within Cushitic; the only other documented subject clitic is *a=* in Gawwada (see Tosco and Mettouchi 2007).

³The unspecified actor is understood to be human, if the wind closed the door have to say:

- (i) Albaab-ka wuu is xir-ay
 door-det.m WAA+3ms REFL close-3ms.pst
 The door closed.

- d. Waa in **la** cadayaa labo jeer maalin kasta.
 WAA que LA blanchir.prog.prs deux fois jour chaque
 (translation = (17e)) (Som)
- e. **One** should brush one's teeth twice a day.

• Agreement in the 3rd singular

- (18) a. on the verb (English, French, German, Somali, Spanish, Yiddish),
 see ex (17)
- b. on the participle (French)
 Une fois qu'on s'est mis au go, on ne veut plus jouer
 one time that-ON refl-is started.**ms** at Go ON neg wants more play
 autre chose.
 other thing
 Once you start with Go, you do not want to play anything else.
- c. on the adjective (French, Spanish)
 Quand on est amoral/ *amoraux, on n'obtient pas ce qu'on
 when ON is amoral.**sg** amoral.**mpl** ON neg-gets neg that which-one
 veut. (Fr)
 wants
 When one is amoral, one doesn't get what one wants.
- Cuando uno está cansado/ *cansados, uno no debe conducir. (Sp)
 when UNO is tired.**ms**/ tired.**mpl** UNO neg should drive
 When one is tired one shouldn't drive.
- d. on the possessive (German, French)
 Man kann **sein** Auto hier nicht parken. (*sein*=3ms poss)
 On ne peut pas garer **sa** voiture ici. (*sa*=3s poss)
 One cannot park one's car here.

• In French, impersonal *on* can appear with a feminine or masculine adjective (in the singular), have the same flexibility with polite 2sg:

- (19) a. Quand on est beau / belle, ...
 when ON is good-looking.**ms** / good-looking.**fs**
- b. Vous êtes beau / belle.
 You.sg.polite are good-looking.**ms** / good-looking.**fs**

3.2 Semantic properties

3.2.1 Generic and episodic readings

- Some impersonal pronouns admit an episodic reading, others do not (e.g. Spanish *uno*, English *one*, Icelandic *maður* Jónsson (1992), West Frisian *men* Hoekstra (2010)):

- (20) a. Gestern hat **man** mir mein Rad geklaut.
 Hier, **on** m'a volé mon vélo. (episodic)
 Yesterday, my bike was stolen (lit. yesterday, one stole my bike)
- b. An der Rezeption hat **man** mir gesagt, ich könne den Aufzug benutzen.
 A l'accueil **on** m'a dit que je pouvais utiliser l'ascenseur. (episodic)
 At the reception, I was told that I could use the lift (lit ... one told me ...)
- (21) a. the drift generic > 1pl is independently attested, for *si* in Italian, for *a gente* in Brazilian Portuguese (see Menuzzi (1999); Taylor (2009) and references cited there), for *man* in Scandinavian Egerland (2003).
- b. Question: are episodic readings are an intermediate stage?
 I.e. is the drift systematically GENERIC > EPISODIC > 1PL

3.2.2 Semantic number

- Impersonal pronouns behave as semantically plural: they license reciprocals in German and Yiddish, and reciprocal readings of reflexives in French, Somali, German and Yiddish.

- (22) a. impersonal pronouns and reciprocals
- i. **Man**_i grüßte **einander**_i wieder. (Ge)
 One greeted each other again.
- ii. me kukt **eyns** af **dos andere** on grishn zikh (Yi)
 MEN looks one on the other without greet refl
 One looks one at the other without greeting each other.
- b. impersonal pronouns and reciprocal readings of reflexives
- i. **Man**_i grüßte **sich**_i wieder. (Ge)
- ii. **On**_i **se**_i saluait à nouveau. (Fr)
 One greeted each other again.

- iii. Markaa **la is-la** hadl-aa
 moment-Foc LA REFL+LA speak-prs.3ms
 When one speaks with each other ... (Som)

3.2.3 Anaphora

- For co-reference, need to repeat the impersonal pronoun (the star indicates that the coreferent reading is impossible):

- (23) a. Wenn **man_i** nicht aufpasst, kann **man_i** / ***er_i** sich erkälten (German)
 b. Si **on_i** ne fait pas attention, **on_i** / ***il_i** peut s'enrhumer. (French)
 c. when **one_i** isn't careful, **one_i** / ***he_i** can catch a cold.
 d. Aqal-ka markaa **la_i** dhisayo, aad **baa** / ***b+uu_i** **lo_i**oga
 house-det moment+BAA LA builds, very **BAA** / BAA+3ms LA+U+KA
 tahadaraa.
 attentive-is
 When one builds a house, one is very careful. (Som)

- For co-reference, need to repeat the impersonal pronoun: impersonal pronouns that do not have a form for a given feature combination cannot be taken up:

- (24) Oblique form (accusative)
 a. Wenn **man_i** anruft, erteilt **einem_i** / ***ihm_i** der Portier eine Auskunft. (German)
 b. Si **on_i** appelle, le portier ***lui_i** donne un renseignement. (French)
 c. When **one_i** rings, the porter gives ?**one_i** the details.
 (25) Possessive pronoun (anaphora)
 a. **Man_i** kann hier nicht parken oder die Polizei schleppt ***sein_i** Auto ab.
 b. **Uno_i** no puede estacionarse aquí o la policía va a confiscar ***su_i** carro.
 c. **On_i** ne peut pas se garer ici ou la police va embarquer ***sa_i** voiture.
 d. ?? **One** cannot park here or the police will tow **one's** car away.

- Note that **one's** can be used without an antecedent:

- (26) a. One's dreams should remain private.
 b. One's parents are important.

- If... then clauses are much better:

- (27) a. If one rings the Ministry one's request is dealt with in less than an week.
 b. One cannot park here since one's car is towed away.

But compare:

- (28) a. **Man_i** kann hier parken und ***sein_i** Auto wird sogar bewacht.
 Wenn jemand hier parkt wird sein Auto überwacht.
 b. **Uno_i** puede estacionarse aquí y ***su_i** carro hasta está vigilado.
 c. **On_i** peut se garer ici et sa ***sa_i** voiture est même surveillée.
 One can park here and *his car will even be guarded.

Compare

Si qqn se gare ici, sa voiture sera surveillée.
 If someone parks here his car will be guarded.

3.2.4 Bound possessives

- Binding of possessive pronouns by impersonal pronouns varies across languages

- (29) In German and French, possessive 3ms pronouns can be bound in the same clause – if tense is generic, but not in episodic sentences.

- a. Generic:

In diesem Kasten kann **man seine** Adresse hinterlassen. (Ge)

Dans cette boîte **on** peut laisser **son** adresse. (Fr)

- b. Episodic:

* Heute morgen hat **man seine** Adresse für dich hinterlassen. (Ge)

* Ce matin **on** a laissé **son** adresse pour toi. (Fr)

This morning (some)one left his address for you. comparer avec:

Heute morgen hat **man** eine Nachricht für dich hinterlassen.

Ce matin **on** a laissé un message pour toi.

This morning (some)one left a message for you.

- (30) In Somali and Yiddish, the impersonal pronouns (*la* and *men* respectively) cannot bind a 3ms possessive (cf Cabredo Hofherr (2004) for Somali, Prince 2006 for Yiddish) in neither generic nor episodic contexts:

- a. Halkaan baabuur-***kiisa_i** **lo_i**oga ma tegi karo.
 here car-det.poss3ms LA+U+KA neg leave can.3ms
 One cannot leave one's car here.

(Som)

- b. **men**_i tor nit blaybn in **zayn**_{*i/j} shtetl
 MEN should neg stay in poss3ms village
 One_i should not stay in one's_{*i} village
 (no co-reference men-zayn Prince (2006)) (Yi)

• There is a further complication: Yiddish *zayn* does not admit a bound reading, but Somali *-kiisa* does:

- (31) a. **keyner**_i blaybt nisht in ***zayn**_i shtot
 no-one stays neg in poss.ms village
 Noone stays in his village. (his= someone previously mentioned, no bound reading)
- b. **Qof-kasta**_i wuxuu dhistaa aqal-**kiisa**_i.
 Person-each WAXAA+3ms builds house-his.
 Everyone builds his house.

• Yiddish seems to have adopted the possessive system of Slavonic languages that distinguishes reflexive possession (without person/number e.g *svoi* in Russian) from non-reflexive possession (that marks person number and (gender for 3sg) *moi/ tvoi/ ego/ ee/ naš/ vaš / ix* in Russian).

- (32) a. **men**_i tor nisht blaybn in **eygenem**_i shtetl
 one can neg stay in own town
 One shouldn't stay in one's own town.
- b. **s'-eygen**_i kind ken **men**_i nisht oyslernen leyenen
 det-own child can one neg teach read
 One cannot teach one's own child to read.

• Notice that the dichotomy generic vs. episodic is too coarse: examples like the following are episodic but allow binding of a possessive, but they seem to have particular conditions: the speaker has to have direct evidence (shoes, dirt, mess) and possibly has to accuse someone indirectly for this to work.

See Creissels (to appear) for a first proposal to systematically classify readings of *on*.

- (33) On a encore rangé ses chaussures dans mon placard.
 on has again put-away poss.3sg shoes in my wardrobe
 Someone has again put their shoes in my wardrobe.

3.3 Defectivity and suppletion

- Defectivity and suppletion: the impersonal pronouns in French/ Yiddish are defective in that they do not have a non-nominative clitic form, but German *man* has suppletive forms for the dative and accusative (but not for the genitive).

- (34) **Problem:** Substitution by semantically close constructions is common
 When **one** goes in there they tell **you** to come back later.
 Should this be treated as suppletion: no, since the nominative *you* also functions as an impersonal (unlike German *einer*)

- There are contexts where *on* has a non-subject form *soi* (cf. Zribi-Hertz (2003) and references cited there):

- (35) a. On n'aime jamais vraiment que soi.
 One neg loves never really but oneself.
- b. On ne peint bien que soi et les siens.
 One neg paints well but oneself and one's family. (A. France).
- c. Travailler pour soi est une chose bien agréable.
 To work for oneself is a very pleasant thing. (S. de Beauvoir). (exs from Zribi-Hertz (to appear))

4 The analysis

- I propose an analysis for the properties **Anaphora** and for **Bound possessives** (in progress).

- (36) a. I propose that impersonal pronouns are comparable to personal pronouns in their binding behaviour across sentence boundaries: they have to be repeated.
- b. I propose that the binding differences between episodic and generic uses of the impersonal pronoun is due to the featural makeup: generic pronouns in some languages contain a lexical generic operator which is absent in the impersonal pronoun that appears in episodic sentences.

4.1 Anaphora

- As Prince (2006) points out for French and Yiddish two occurrences of an impersonal pronoun can be co-referent or disjoint:

- (37) a. **On** dit maintenant qu'**on** doit manger 5 légumes par jour.
ON says now that-ON should eat 5 vegetables per day
Now they say that one should eat two portions of vegetable a day.
- b. Quand **on** se met sur la pelouse, **on** est bien.
when ON refl puts on the grass, ON is well
When one sits down on the grass, one feels at ease.

- This pattern is the same for unstressed personal pronouns:

- (38) a. Situation A : a little girl is playing in the garden. (coreference)
Situation B : a mother who is worried unless her daughter is playing in the garden (disjoint).
- b. Elle_i n'est bien que quand elle_{i/j} joue dans le jardin.
- c. Nur wenn sie_i im Garten spielt, ist sie_{i/j} zufrieden. (all)
- d. Only when she_i plays in the garden, she_{i/j} is happy. (angl)

- Stressed personal pronouns (sometimes) induce a disjointness effect:

- (39) Cuando él vende una casa, él_{*i/k} tiene que hacer muchos trámites.
when he sells a house he has to make many official-papers

- Like personal pronouns, *man* cannot follow an object pronoun

- (40) a. dass mich jemand anruft
b. dass jemand mich anruft
c. dass mich Hans anruft
d. dass Hans mich anruft
e. *dass mich man anruft
f. dass man mich anruft
g. *dass mich er anruft
h. dass er mich anruft

- Unlike plural personal pronouns, *man* does not allow numeral co-occurrence (from Bhat (2004)), and what I call here the “we men” test (from Postal 1969: 217-219). (See Taylor (2009) for these tests that he applies to *a gente*)

- (41) a. Wir drei gehen jetzt.
us three leave now
We three are leaving now.
- b. **Man** drei hat mir geholfen.
man three has me helped
Not: three people helped me.
- (42) a. Wir Linguisten haben ihm geholfen.
us linguists have him helped
us linguists helped him
- b. Man Linguisten haben mir geholfen.
man linguists have me helped
Not: some linguists helped me

- The two preceding properties could be linked to the fact that we need strong pronouns for these modifications and that *man* is obligatorily a weak pronoun (thank you to Verner Egerland and Jarich Hoekstra for pointing this out to me, this also applies to the ordering with respect to subject pronouns in 40).
- Impersonal pronouns and 3rd person personal pronouns differ from indefinite pronouns in that their referent is unique in the given context, so co-reference is possible.

The indefinite pronoun behaves like an indefinite GN: it introduces a new variable in the context and co-reference between two indefinites is impossible.

- I follow Koenig and Mauner (1999): impersonal pronouns are a separate type which is neither definite nor indefinite, which they call **a-definite**. They propose that this type of pronoun is the lexical equivalent of an implicit argument: it saturates an argumental position but is not accessible for anaphoric reference (Prince (2006) proposes a similar analysis in the framework of Centering Theory).

However, as we will see below, this is not really convincing since implicit pronouns have other binding properties than *man*.

4.2 Bound possessives

- As we have seen above, some impersonal pronouns can bind possessives.
- Implicit arguments **cannot** bind possessive pronouns:

- (43) a. Zu Neujahr wäscht man_i seinen_{i/j} Wagen.

Le Jour de l'An on_i lave sa_{i/j} voiture.
One washes one's /his car on New Year's Day.

- b. Sein Wagen wird zu Neujahr gewaschen.
Sa voiture est lavée le Jour de l'An.
His car is washed on New Year's Day.
(not: One's car is washed on New Year's Day.)
- c. Die Reinigung seines Wagens wird zu Neujahr vorgenommen.
Le nettoyage de sa voiture se fait le Jour de l'An.
The cleaning of his car is done on New Year's Day.
(not: The cleaning of one's car ...)

- First proposal:

- (44) Proposal: Certain impersonal pronouns can bind because they contain a lexical generic operator as part of their lexical make-up.
That generic operator binds the possessive.

- I find this proposal is problematic, since there is no overt linguistic correlate that would allow us to make predictions, but it seems to be necessary to account for the difference between Somali and German/French:

- (45) a. Somali *la* does not contain a generic operator: generic readings are due to a sentence-level generic operator, so never have binding of the possessive.
- b. German and French have two impersonal pronouns:
(i) a generic one, containing a lexical generic operator
(ii) an episodic one, which does not contain this operator.
(compare referential and impersonal *es/il*).

- Problem: It seems that the generic operator we know can take scope over a frequency adverbial, but *man* cannot (Zifonun (2000) for German, same is true for French *on*):

- (46) Students rarely complain.
Few students complain.
Students make few complaints.
- (47) a. Man hat mir zweimal mein Rad geklaut.
On m'a volé mon vélo deux fois.

Twice someone stole my bike (twice > sb) (not sb > twice)

- b. Jemand hat mir zweimal mein Rad geklaut.
 Quelqu'un m'a volé mon vélo deux fois.
 somebody stole my bike twice (sb > twice and ? twice > sb)

- This argument is not cogent since the German and French examples are episodic uses of *on/man* that would not be analysed as containing a generic operator (thank you to Verner Egerland for pointing this out to me). (Need to check how generic *man* behaves).

- I would prefer something like

(48) Proposal 2: The incompatibility can be traced back to the semantic plural properties of impersonal pronouns.

In episodic sentences, the singular on the possessive induces a singular interpretation on the impersonal, which in episodic sentences forces a specific reading.

- If Proposal 2 can be made to work, it is more insightful, since number is somehow more visible than "generic operator".

(49) Evidence that the **episodic** reading is still plural

- a. compatibility with reciprocals (see above)
- b. can further look at compatibility with
 - i. collective predicates
 - ii. *together* and similar expressions
 - iii. distributive expressions *each*, German *je*

- But if number cannot be the only factor, o/w I would not expect Somali to differ from German/ French.

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