

Person and number markers in Spanish verb forms

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Abstract

This article tests the claim that Spanish person and number markers are fused, hence impossible to separate. Traditional studies presume that number values cumulate in person markers, thus creating the portmanteau PN. While agreeing that number values lack their own markers, a few analyses depart from cumulation. They conflate person and number into an overarching category, which entails that there will be a single marker for them. The merit of conflation is that, by using a combinatorial system of persons to compose the values of the overarching category, it finds a means to deal with heterogeneous referentiality, a concomitant effect of pluralization. On close scrutiny, however, neither approach proves satisfactory. Cumulation leads to fictitious constructs and conflation fails to explain why pluralization affects referentiality. The alternative put forth corresponds to the third logical option: segregation. Person and number markers can be disentangled when one recognizes that, alongside monoexponence, there are alternative modes of structural-coding (i.e. nonexponence and polyexponence). The fact that pluralization induces heterogeneous referentiality is tied to deixis, which, in addition to requiring multiple elements, orders them with respect to the origo. This organization also sheds light on the relation between person and number and another grammatical category: clusivity.

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1. Introduction

Two of the grammatical categories contributing to the richness of Spanish verbal inflection are person and number. It is evident from examples such as those in (1) that finite verb forms include a reference to participants in the speech event (i.e. person) as well as a reference to their quantity (i.e. number). The meaning of (1a) implies, for instance, that the speaker alone is conducting the activity, while that of (1b) implies that the speaker and at least one other person are doing so.

- (1) a. Sumo los gastos.
I add the expenses.
b. Sumamos los gastos.
We add the expenses.

It has traditionally been assumed that Spanish exploits three values from the category 'person' (i.e. [1st person], [2nd person], and [3rd person]) and two values from the category 'number' (i.e. [singular] and [plural]). From this standpoint, the

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Table 1
Intersection of the person and number categories.

Person	Number	
	[singular]	[plural]
[1 st person]	sumo	sumamos
[2 nd person]	sumas	sumáis
[3 rd person]	suma	suman

Table 2
Conflation of person and number into a single category.

Actancy	
[1 st actant]	sumo
[2 nd actant]	sumas
[3 rd actant]	suma
[4 th actant]	sumamos
[5 th actant]	sumáis
[6 th actant]	suman

fact that each tense has a paradigm consisting of six forms makes perfect sense (i.e. $3 \times 2 = 6$).¹ The present indicative of *sumar* ‘to add’, for example, has the paradigm in Table 1.²

Morphological analyses drawing on person and number face a major challenge. Isolating the markers of these categories is hardly a trivial task. In *sumo* ‘I add’, for instance, *–o* is the only marker that can be isolated from the root *sum–*; thus, if one takes it to be the marker of person, there would be no marker for number. Alternatively, one could assume that *–o* is the marker of number, but then, there would be no marker for person. This conundrum has led to CUMULATION, the hypothesis that it is possible for different category values to heap up. By this reasoning, person and number cumulate in the marker *–o*. The standard analysis of Spanish person and number capitalizes on this idea (Saporta, 1959; Stockwell et al., 1965; Real Academia Española (REA), 1973, 2009; Hooper, 1976a,b; Alcoba, 1992, among many others).

A few authors depart from cumulation and propose CONFLATION instead. This is the hypothesis that person and number are integrants of an overarching category (Hernández Alonso, 1975, 1984, 2000; Rabanales, 1977; Cysouw, 2003). In one guise of this proposal, the larger category is ‘actancy’, a term normally used to refer to all nominal arguments of the verb, but applied in this case to one actant in particular: the external argument. Table 2 illustrates this approach. Observe that [1st actant], [2nd actant], and [3rd actant] replace the singular counterparts of [1st person], [2nd person], and [3rd person], while [4th actant], [5th actant], and [6th actant] replace their plural counterparts.

Since the adoption of conflation would have repercussions for the structure of all finite verb forms, caution advises not to proceed without careful consideration. Only if conflation afforded some practical benefit would it be worth reconfiguring the entire verbal system. The following question must then be asked. In what way is the configuration $[6 \times 1 = 6]$ superior to the configuration $[3 \times 2 = 6]$?

The answer has to do with economy. The morphological structure of finite verb forms would be simplified if one opted for the configuration $[6 \times 1 = 6]$. This follows from the reasoning that, if person and number constituted a single grammatical category, they would occupy a single paradigmatic position, which means that there would be a single marker for them. The fact that all attempts to disentangle person and number markers have been unsuccessful would then be perfectly understandable.

The purpose of this article is to advocate a third alternative: SEGREGATION. This is the hypothesis that person and number remain separate throughout the morphology. It is demonstrated that the Spanish inflectional system provides a paradigmatic position for each of these grammatical categories. They can, as a result, be separately coded, which obviates the need for cumulation and conflation. The appearance that person and number markers are fused is shown to have a simple explanation. In certain contexts, one or both of the relevant paradigmatic positions are left without any

¹ Semantic factors reduce that number to two in the imperative (i.e. *suma*, *sumad* ‘take’) and, in the case of defective verbs such as *llover*, to a single one in any tense (e.g. *llueve* ‘it rains’).

² Some Latin American dialects have an alternative form for second person singular (e.g. *sumás*, *sumái*, or *sumáis*) which is historically related to the second person plural form (e.g. *sumáis*). This is known as *voseo*, a highly variable phenomenon which cannot be addressed here. For a recent survey, see Angulo Rincón (2009).

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