The indefinite quantifier *no sé cuántísimo* in Contemporary Spanish

Michiel de Vaan

*Université de Lausanne*

Many European languages contain an indefinite construction that consists of ‘I don’t know’ and an interrogative pronoun, of the type *pour je ne sais combien d’années* ‘for I-don’t-know-how-many years’ in French. Of the Spanish equivalent, *no sé cuánto* ‘I don’t know how many’, a superlative *no sé cuantísimo* ‘I don’t know how very much/many’, ‘an awful lot’, has been derived in the twentieth century. In this paper, I give examples of its usage from Spanish text corpora, discuss the formal variants of the construction, and argue that no sé cuantísimo has been grammaticalized as a marker of large indefinite quantity. The historical origin of the superlative cuantísimo lies in an analogy with tantísimo ‘so very many’, attested in Spanish since the 17th century.

1. Introduction

The interrogative and relative adjective ‘how many’ is uninflected in many European languages, as in French *combien*, English *how much, how many*, Dutch *hoeveel*, Russian *skol’ko*, Lithuanian *kiek*, Albanian *sa*. In German, *wie viel* is generally used uninflected in colloquial speech but has a variant *wie viele* with plural referents in higher registers. A different situation obtains in most of the Romance languages, where the Latin adjective *quantus* ‘how big’ was inherited as the word for ‘how much, how many’. When used as a relative and as an interrogative, the word retains inflection for gender and number: Portuguese *quanto* / *-a* / *-os* / *-as*, Spanish *cuánto* / *-a* / *-os* / *-as*, Catalan *quant* / *-a* / *-s* / *-es*, Italian *quanto* / *-a* / *-i* / *-e*. These adjectives can also be used as intensifiers or exlamatives meaning ‘how much! how many!’.

A peculiarity of Modern
Spanish which is directly linked to the inflected status of the adjective is the creation of a superlative *cuantísimo*, expressing a very high degree of intensity (cf. Rainer 2015 on intensification in general). This novel form fits into a pattern seen in many languages, viz. that degree markers tend to be replaced by more explicitly intensifying variants once their original meaning is attenuated (Athanasiadou 2007). The Spanish superlative can also be inserted into the indefinite ‘don't-know-how-many’ construction, indicating an unspecified, very large quantity. The degree of grammaticalization of the latter constructional idiom (in the terminology of Booij 2010, 13) will be assessed using contemporaneous text samples from blogs and other websites¹.

2. *TANTÍSIMO AND CUANTÍSIMO*

In Spanish (especially in Peninsular Spanish, according to *NGLE* § 22.14ñ), demonstrative *tanto* ‘so much, many’ and interrogative and exclamative *cuánto* ‘how much, how many’ have the additional feature of forming a superlative in -ísimo with intensive (meaning ‘a high degree’) or exclamative (thus defined by *NGLE*) semantics, *tantísimo* ‘so very much, so very many’ and *cuantísimo* ‘how very much, how very many’. They share this feature with the other quantifiers *mucho* ‘much’ and *poco* ‘little, few’. The form *tantísimo* is first attested in Spanish texts in 1620, whereas *cuantísimo* does not appear before the 1880s and was probably modeled on *tantísimo*. Here are some examples²:

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¹ I am indebted to Mónica Castillo Lluch and an anonymous reviewer for remarks on a first version of this paper.

² The linguistic examples in the text have through numbering; the Spanish text is followed by an interlinear gloss and a free translation. The following grammatical abbreviations are used in the glosses: cond = conditional, f = feminine, ger = gerund, ipf = imperfect, m = masculine, obj = object, pl = plural, pn = personal name, pres = present, pret = preterite, ptc = past participle, refl = reflexive, rel = relative, sbjv = subjunctive, sg = singular, sup = superlative.
(1) 1645, Palafox y Mendoza, *Carta a Inocencio X* (CNDHE):

como tantísimas veces abandonaron

muchísimas otras [parroquias] por el mal clima de los lugares

‘as so very many times they abandoned very many other [parishes] because of the bad climate of those places’

(2) 1884, Barros Arana, *Historia General de Chile* (CNDHE):

viendo en ello cuantísima ganancia.

‘seeing enormous gains in it.’

(3) 1893, Azcárate y Fernández, *Insectos y criptógamas que invaden los cultivos en España* (CNDHE):

se comprende qué de inquietudes y cuantísimas pérdidas no asaltarían el ánimo

‘one understands what anxieties and what enormous losses would assail the mood’

(4) 1890, Felipe Trigo, *El cínico*:

Gerardo, (...) viró en disculpas hacia Mavi: - Señora cuantísimo lo siento

3 In this example, cuantísima is not used as a relative and has more or less the same meaning as tantísima; this specific usage is not acceptable anymore in present-day Spanish.
'Gerardo ... turned to apologize towards Mavi: Madam, I am so very sorry'

(5) 2007, Enrique Arias Vega, El Secreto de Mari Mar⁴:

`¡Alberto! ¡Cuánto tiempo! Y me estampó dos sonoros besos (...) – ¡Cuantísimo`

such a very long time has passed! he kept repeating.’

(6) blog, no year indicated, http://www.inteligencia-emocional.org/curso/cartasporelcurso.htm:

‘Dear teachers, you don’t know how very much I am enjoying taking this online course’.

3. INDEFINITE ‘I-DON’T-KNOW-HOW-MANY’

A common strategy to express a large but unspecified quantity is to combine a syntagm meaning ‘I don't know’ with an adverb or adjectives meaning ‘how much/many’. Many European languages know this construction, e.g. French pour je ne sais combien d’années ‘for I-don't-know-how-many years’, Dutch dat duurt ik weet niet hoeveel jaar ‘that will take I-don't-know-how-many-years’. This is

⁴ http://revistaatticus.es/2010/06/01/el-secreto-de-mari-mar-historia-mas-que-probable.
one instantiation of the well-known construction, particularly frequent in European languages (Haspelmath 1997, 130), which combines ‘I don’t know’ with interrogative pronouns in order to convey indefinite meaning. The meaning ‘I don’t know how many’ often develops into ‘an enormous quantity’, the pragmatic stress (and often also the prosodic stress) shifting from ‘not knowing’ to ‘how many’. In English, the phrase Arsenal haven’t won the league for I don’t know how many years (Independent, 7 January 2016; the league is the main football competition in England) can have two readings: (1) I don’t exactly know how many years it’s been since Arsenal last won the league; (2) It’s been many many years since Arsenal last won the league, too many years to remember. In some languages the difference between interpretations (1) and (2) might be conveyed by intonation. In Dutch, the normal interpretation has become (2). The same is probably true for French, where je ne sais combien ‘I don’t know how many’ usually means ‘quite a high number’ rather than ‘some unknown number’. Compare the following quotation: “mais une fois, dans je ne sais combien de milliers de chances, deux êtres se répondent par toutes les facultés de leur esprit et de leur âme” (Mme. de Staël, Delphine, éd. 1838).

The preponderance of the first person in the verb forms making out this construction can be understood as pragmatically triggered, since the first person stresses the subjectiveness of the proposition and hence leaves open the possibility that the addressee (you) or a third party (he, she, they) are better informed about the quantity being guessed at. The prevalence of the singular ‘I’ above the plural ‘we’ is given by the predominantly individual perspective of the speaker, although as we shall see the first person plural does occur in some specific contexts. It is no coincidence that, in French, a construction such as dans nous ne savons combien (de pays, maisons, générations) ‘in we don’t know how many (countries, houses, generations)’ is only found in nineteenth-century prose, which often uses the first person plural for the narrator’s perspective. A third possibility beside the subjects ‘I’ and ‘we’ is the impersonal form, as in French dans on ne sait combien de temps ‘in one-does-not-know how much time’. In French one could be inclined to regard the use
of on as a colloquial variant for nous, but the Spanish evidence below shows that the impersonal interpretation is more likely. The impersonal pronoun emphasizes the indefiniteness of the quantity being referred to, and increases the (alleged) general value of the claim being made.

4. No sé cuánto

In Spanish, the construction equivalent to French je ne sais combien is no sé cuánto ‘I don’t know how many’, which indicates “un número elevado, aunque impreciso, de personas o cosas” ['a high but imprecise number of people or things'] (NGLE §20.7n). The adjective is inflected for gender (masculine, feminine) and number (singular, plural). The oldest example given in the reference grammar is from 1876, from the novel Doña Perfecta by Pérez Galdós. The negation is usually plain no, but on the web I also found some instances with ya no ‘no longer, not even’, an expression stressing the hopelessness of estimating the number involved. The verb is nearly always in the present tense and in most of the attestations contains the first singular sé ‘I know’ or the third person singular impersonal se sabe ‘one knows, they know’. I did not find this construction with sabes ‘you (sg.) know’, sabéis ‘you (pl.) know’, sabe ‘s/he knows’ or saben ‘they know’.

4.1 Here are some examples with no sé ‘I don’t know’, mostly taken from online blogs and fora. Like in French, the implication of the ‘don’t-know-how-much/many’ construction is ‘a lot’, which is how I will translate most of the following passages.

(7) blog, http://www.forocoches.com/, 19 July 2011:

aún así dicen que les debo

even thus say.3PL.PRES that them owe.1SG.PRES

no sé cuánto dinero

not know.1SG.PRES how.much.M.SG money

‘still they tell me that I owe them a lot of money’
(8) blog, http://www.tripadvisor.es, opinion written 26 January 2017:

Un solo ascensor para no sé
one single.M.SG lift for not know.1SG.PRES
cuánta gente!
how.much.F.SG people.SG

‘A single lift for sooo many people!’

(9) 1989, Jaime Saenz, La piedra imán. Obra póstuma, p. 130:

Luego dice que está escribiendo la
next say.3SG.PRES that be.3SG.PRES write.GER the.F.SG
historia de la música, en no sé
history of the.F.SG music in not know.1SG.PRES
cuántos tomos
how.much.M.PL volume.PL

‘Next he says that he's writing the history of music in a lot of volumes’

(10) 2013, Hugo Horiot, El emperador, soy yo: Una infancia en el autismo. Spanish translation by Manuel Serrat Crespo:

Mi madre ha escrito unos 20
my mother have.3SG.PRES write.PTC one.M.PL 20
libros, algunos de ellos traducidos a
no sé cuántas lenguas
not know.1SG.PRES how.much.F.PL language.PL

‘My mother has written about 20 books, some of them translated into a lot of languages’

4.2 Here are some further examples, now with no se sabe ‘one does not know’:

(11) blog, https://www.laprensa.com.ni, Cartas al director, 23 October 2003:
para hacer=lo se ha gastado no se
to do=it REFL have.3SG.PRES spend.PTC not REFL

sabe cuánto dinero
know.3SG.PRES how.much.M.SG money

‘in order to do that, a lot of money has been spent’

(12) blog, https://daniellebrato.com/, 27 January 2011:

Con (...) lo que le cuesta a-l
with it REL him cost.3SG.PRES to-the
Ayuntamiento el concurso anual, habría
Municipality the.M.SG competition yearly have.3SG.COND
para no se sabe cuántas
for not REFL know.3SG.PRES how.much.F.PL obras sociales
work.PL social.PL

‘With what the yearly competition costs the Municipality, there
would be enough for a lot of social work’

(13) blog, http://www.jaimeaguilera.net, 7 February 2008:

conocida en estos dos casos, desconocida en
known.F.SG in this.M.PL 2 case.PL unknown.F.SG in
no se sabe cuántos
not REFL know.3SG how.much.M.PL

‘known in these two cases, unknown in a lot [of them]’

Here, the masculine cuántos refers back to casos.

4.3 The first plural sabemos is rarely found. The following passage is
taken from a story which is told by a narrator in the first person plural,
which triggers sabemos (compare French nous ne savons combien ‘we don't know how many’ discussed above):

(14) blog, http://deambulatorio.blogspot.ch, 26 August 2005:

Jaime ha vivido en ya
PN have.3SG.PRES live.PTC in already
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An interesting feature of Spanish is the integration of the superlative *cuantísimo* into the indefinite quantity construction. Like in the case of *no sé cuánto*, the exclamative construction *no sé cuantísimo* ‘I don’t know how very much/many’, ‘an awful lot’, ‘an enormous amount’, is inflected for gender and number\(^5\). It is a more recent construction than *no sé cuánto*, since *no sé cuantísimo* is unattested in the historical corpora before the end of the twentieth century and is not mentioned in the authoritative recent grammar *NGLE*. *No sé cuantísimo* is found in the singular with non-count nouns (*dinero* ‘money’, *tiempo* ‘time’, *gente* ‘people’, *experiencia* ‘experience’, *mierda* ‘shit’, etc.), in the plural with count nouns and persons (*años* ‘years’, *delitos* ‘crimes’, *botellas* ‘bottles’, *veces* ‘times’, *personas* ‘persons’, *obispos* ‘bishops’, etc.), and substantivized (*han gastado no sé cuantísimo* ‘they have spent an awful lot’). The occurrence of *no sé cuantísimo* as a fixed construction, which can be the direct object of a clause or depend on a governing preposition, contradicts the claim in *NGLE*, § 7.4c, that *cuantísimo* “solo se utiliza encabezando grupos sintácticos exclamativos” [‘is only used as the head of exclamative syntactic groups’].

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\(^5\) Note that suffixal -*ste* in Dutch *hoeveelste* ‘how-manieth’ is homonymous with the Dutch superlative suffix -*st(e)*, but in reality represents the ordinal suffix (taken from *honderdste, duizendste*, etc.) ‘hundred-th, thousand-th’. Therefore, the expression *de ik-weet-niet-hoeveelste* means ‘the I-don’t-know-how-manieth’ and cannot be equated with Spanish *no sé cuantísimo*.
5.1 Examples with no sé from recent blog entries found online\(^6\) include:

(15) blog, http://m.forocoches.com/, 17 July 2012:

\[
\text{Por otra parte, me parece también una capullada que tengo que gastar=me no sé cuántísimo dinero en vestir=me para ir a la boda...}
\]

‘On the other hand, I think it's completely daft that I have to spend an awful lot of money on dressing up to go to the wedding’

(16) blog, http://foros.vogue.es/, 28 October 2009:

\[
\text{pensar que su profesión es cantar, y que hacer=lo con no sé cuántísimo gente gritando ...}
\]

‘To think that her profession is to sing, and to do that with an awful lot of people yelling ...’

(17) blog, http://confarruco.blogspot.ch/, 24 April 2013:

\[
\text{Carlos Carles reclamó ante el Presidente Chávez la construcción del Centro Cultural por el que lleva}
\]

\(^6\) The oral corpus PRESEEA yielded no hits.
Carlos Carles demanded from President Chavez the construction of the Cultural Center, for which he has been fighting for an awful lot of years’

(18) blog, http://www.lne.es/economia/, 12 February 2015:
Por sus colaboraciones en no sé cuántísimos años luchando.
by their participation in not know how much years fight.GER

‘From their participations in an awful lot of businesses’

(19) blog, http://www.tenemostetas.com/, 29 March 2013:
cuántísimas empresas
how much SUP.F.PL business

‘When your text reached me through Facebook I read it an awful lot of times in a row’

5.2 Here are some examples with the impersonal no se sabe:

(20) blog, https://www.filmaffinity.com/es/, 20 April 2015:
Esta es una mujer que lleva no se sabe cuántísimo tiempo con el novio
this be a.f woman not know know how much time with the M.SG boyfriend

‘She's a woman who has been dating her boyfriend for an awfully long time’
‘simple words that can inflict an awful lot of damage’

‘for the first time in many many years’

‘that great actor, nominated an awful lot of times for numerous awards’

5.3 An instance with a first-person plural verb sabemos is found in the following passage, where it is triggered by hicimos ‘we made’ in the preceding subclause:
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desde que lo hicimos hace ya
since that it make.1PL.PRET ago already
no sabemos cuántísimo tiempo)
not know.1PL.PRES how.much.SUP.M.SG time

‘our great Pollock painting (which has been exhibited in our high school ever since we made it, which is so long ago that we don't even remember)’

Similarly, in the following passage we find a rare instance of the second person singular no sabes ‘you don't know’, triggered by the second singulars sabes and estás in the preceding clauses:

(25) blog, http://nohaynorte.blogspot.ch/, 22 July 2014:

Sólo sabes que estás en un lugar a no sabes cuántísimos
only know.2SG.PRES that be.2SG.PRES in a.M place at not know.2SG.PRES how.much.SUP.M.PL

miles de metros sobre el suelo
1000.PL from meter.PL above the.M.SG ground

‘You only know that you are in a place many many thousands of metres above the ground’

6. Relative NO SABER CUÁN(T(ÍSIMO)

In all of the passages in sections 4 and 5, the indefinite quantity construction functions as the direct object, the prepositional object or a temporal adjunct. But when the inflected form of saber ‘to know’ functions as the main verb of the clause, usually in clause-initial position, the following cuánto or cuantísimo is a relative adverb rather than an interrogative one. Also, in such cases other verb forms can be used, such as the second person singular and plural or the imperfect. We are therefore not dealing with the grammaticalized construction for indefinite quantity:
(26) 2011, Cristina Laria, *La quinta V*, p. 168:

No sabes cuántísimo lamento
not know.2SG.PRES how.much.SUP.M SG deplore.1SG.PRES

No ver=la
not see=her

‘You don’t know how very much I deplore not seeing her.’

(27) blog, http://intentosaber.blogspot.ch/, March 2011:

No sabes cuántísimas ganas
tengo de este libro, y
not know.2SG.PRES how.much.SUP.F.PL lust.PL have.1SG.PRES of this.M SG book and

no sabes cuántísimo sufro por
not know.2SG.PRES how.much.SUP.M SG suffer.1SG by

no encontrar=lo por aquí.
not find=it around here

‘You don’t know how much I would like to read this book, and how much I suffer because I don’t find it here.’

(28) blog, http://www.thepicta.com/user/inmii_89/, 14 September 2016:

Ella no sabe cuántísimo
she not know.3SG.PRES how.much.SUP.M SG

necesito en mi vida!!!
need.1SG.PRES in my life

‘She doesn’t know how very much I need her in my life!’

(29) blog, https://www.facebook.com/produccioneskaboom/posts/, 31 December 2016:

No sabéis cuántísimo os lo
not know.2PL.PRES how.much.SUP.M SG you.PL.OBJ it

agradecemos.
thank.1PL.PRES

‘You (pl.) don’t know how very grateful we are to you because of this.’
No sé cuántismo

(30) blog, http://lavnoticia-iesvcentenario.blogspot.ch/, 29 November 2011:

No sabía cuantísimo trabajo y dedicación lleva detrás.

‘I didn’t know how very much work and dedication is involved in it.’

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that Spanish no sé cuánto and no sé cuantísimo represent constructional idioms which serve as indefinite markers. Haspelmath (1997, 141–143) mentions a number of criteria for judging the degree of grammaticalization of a given construction (see Ramat 2015 for a recent discussion of grammaticalization). The first ones of these are phonological and semantic integrity. On this count, no sé cuánto and no sé cuantísimo score low on the grammaticalization path, since they retain their full phonological value and also the original meaning of the words is still present and retrievable to the speakers. The only feature which may have changed is the intonation: the phrasal stress in the indefinite-quantity constructions falls – to my non-native ears – on cuánto resp. cuantísimo rather than on finite verb forms sé or sabe, where it lies (or, at least, can lie) in the main-verb instances discussed in §6. Whether this prosodic change is really a feature of the Spanish construction would have to be investigated separately. Another criterion for grammaticalization is the reduction of its original syntactic scope. This clearly applies to no sé cuánto and no sé cuantísimo, since, in their indefinite meaning, they have lost their scope over a relative clause and retain scope only over noun phrases; and they themselves have ended up being governed by verbs and prepositions. Yet another criterion mentioned by Haspelmath is the paradigmaticity: to what extent has the original paradigmatic variation been reduced? Here, it is clear that no sé cuánto and no sé cuantísimo are in the process of being grammaticalized. Whereas
the quantifiers themselves have retained their four original options (-o, -a, -os, -as), the verbal paradigm has been reduced to mainly sé and se sabe, with some sporadic instances of sabemos. A final criterion for grammaticalization is the degree of obligatoryness, that is: can the speaker express the same semantic content with other constructions, or have no sé cuánto and no sé cuantísimo become the only way to express exclamative indefinite quantity? Here, of course, the answer is ‘no’: there remain many alternative ways, as is usual for exclamative constructions in general. Future research might want to look at these constructions from a pragmatic viewpoint and compare them with competing utterances, such as quién sabe cuánto ‘who knows how much/many’, Diós sabe cuánto ‘Gods knows how much/many’, muchísimo ‘very many’, un mogollón de ‘a multitude of’, and many other idioms. This will certainly have to be done using corpora of spontaneous, spoken discourse.

A final note to conclude. The construction no sé cuantísimo sounds pretty language-specific to my ears. At first sight, the combination of ‘how many?’ with a superlative suffix seems unlikely, for how could there be a superlative of an interrogative? As we have seen, the explanation must be sought in analogies in the language history of Spanish. The rise of tantísimo, itself a much less problematic concept because tanto possesses an affirmative deictic value, preceded that of cuantísimo by two and a half centuries (at least in written records). So the fixed pair tanto - cuánto will have caused the imitation of tantísimo by cuantísimo. Judging by the citation containing cuántísima ganancia from 1884, as well as other evidence from the 1880s and 1890s, the novel adjective from the beginning possessed the intensifying meaning ‘so very much’ beside its relative meaning (by contrast, it never acquired the interrogative meaning of ¿cuánto?), and it is this intensifying meaning which we find in no sé cuantísimo.

REFERENCES


