

The indefinite quantifier *no sé cuántísimo* in Contemporary Spanish

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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 cuántísimo '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 cuántísimo has been grammaticalized as a marker of large indefinite quantity. The historical origin of the superlative cuántísimo 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 exclamatives 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:

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 interlineary 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)*:

<i>como</i>	<i>tantísimas</i>	<i>veces</i>	<i>abandonaron</i>	
as	so.much.SUP.F.PL	time.PL	abandon.3PL.PRET	
<i>muchísimas</i>	<i>otras</i>	<i>[parroquias]</i>	<i>por</i>	<i>el</i>
many.SUP.F.PL	other.F.PL	parish.PL	because	the.M.SG
<i>mal</i>	<i>clima</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>los</i>	<i>lugares</i>
bad.M.SG	climate	of	the.M.PL	place.PL

‘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)*:

<i>viendo</i>	<i>en</i>	<i>ello</i>	<i>cuantísima</i>	<i>ganancia.</i>
see.GER	in	it	how.much.SUP.F.SG	gains.SG

‘seeing **enormous gains** in it.’³

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

<i>se</i>	<i>comprende</i>	<i>qué</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>inquietudes</i>	<i>y</i>
REFL	understand.3SG.PRES	what	of	anxiety.PL	and
<i>cuantísimas</i>	<i>pérdidas</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>asaltarían</i>	<i>el</i>	
how.much.SUP.F.PL	loss.PL	not	assail.COND	the.M.SG	

ánimo

mood

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

(4) 1890, Felipe Trigo, *El cínico*:

<i>Gerardo, (...)</i>	<i>viró</i>	<i>en</i>	<i>disculpas</i>	<i>hacia</i>
PN	turn.3SG.PRET	in	apology.PL	towards
<i>Mavi:</i>	<i>- Señora</i>	<i>cuantísimo</i>	<i>lo</i>	<i>siento</i>
PN	Madam	how.much.SUP.M.SG	it	be.sorry.1SG.PRES

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 very** sorry'

(5) 2007, Enrique Arias Vega, *El Secreto de Mari Mar*⁴:

¡Alberto! ¡Cuánto tiempo! Y me
 PN how.much.M.SG time and me
estampó dos sonoros besos (...) – ¡Cuántísimo
 press.3SG.PRET two loud.M.PL kiss.PL how.much.SUP.M.SG
tiempo ha pasado! – estaba repitiendo
 time have.3SG.PRES pass.PTC be.3SG.IPF repeat.GER
 "Alberto! It's been such a long time!" And he pressed two loud kisses on me ... "**Such a very long time** has passed!" he kept repeating.'

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

Queridos profesores, no sabéis
 loved.M.PL teacher.PL not know.2PL.PRES
cuántísimo me está gustando realizar
 how.much.SUP.M.SG me be.3SG.PRES like.GER take
este curso on line
 this.M.SG course online

'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:

<i>aún</i>	<i>así</i>	<i>dicen</i>	<i>que</i>	<i>les</i>	<i>debo</i>
even	thus	say.3PL.PRES	that	them	owe.1SG.PRES
<i>no</i>	<i>sé</i>		<i>cuánto</i>		<i>dinero</i>
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
 book.PL some.M.PL of they.M translate.PTC.M.PL into

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

<i>no</i>	<i>sabemos</i>	<i>cuántos</i>	<i>sitios</i>	<i>con</i>
not	know.1PL.PRES	how.much.M.PL	place.PL	with
<i>no</i>	<i>sabemos</i>	<i>cuánta</i>	<i>gente</i>	<i>diferente.</i>
not	know.1PL.PRES	how.much.F.SG	people	different

‘Jaime has lived in **more places than we remember with a lot of different people**’

5. *NO SÉ CUANTÍSIMO*

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 number⁵. 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’].

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.) ‘hundredth, 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 online⁶ include:

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

<i>Por</i>	<i>otra</i>	<i>parte,</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>parece</i>	<i>también</i>
by	other.F.SG	part	me	seem.3SG.PRES	also
<i>una</i>	<i>capullada</i>	<i>que</i>	<i>tenga</i>	<i>que</i>	<i>gastar=me</i>
a.F.SG	stupidity	that	have.to.1SG.SBJV	that	spend=me
<i>no sé</i>	<i>cuantísimo</i>	<i>dinero</i>	<i>en</i>	<i>vestir=me</i>	
not	know.1SG	how.much.SUP.M.SG	money	in	clothe=me
<i>para</i>	<i>ir</i>	<i>a la</i>	<i>boda...</i>		
for	go	to the.F.SG	wedding		

‘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:

<i>pensar</i>	<i>que</i>	<i>su</i>	<i>profesión</i>	<i>es</i>	<i>cantar,</i>
think	that	her	profession	be.3SG.PRES	sing
<i>y</i>	<i>que</i>	<i>hacer=lo</i>	<i>con</i>	<i>no sé</i>	
and	that	do=it	with	not	know.1SG.PRES
<i>cuantísima</i>	<i>gente</i>	<i>gritando ...</i>			
how.much.SUP.F.SG	people	yell.GER			

‘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:

<i>Carlos Carles</i>	<i>reclamó</i>	<i>ante</i>	<i>el</i>	
PN	demand.3SG.PRET	before	the	
<i>Presidente</i>	<i>Chávez</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>construcción</i>	<i>del</i> <i>Centro</i>
President	PN	the.F.SG	construction	of-the Center
<i>Cultural</i>	<i>por</i>	<i>el</i>	<i>que</i>	<i>lleva</i>
Cultural	for	the.M.SG	REL	carry.3SG.PRES

⁶ The oral corpus PRESEEA yielded no hits.

no sé cuantísimos años luchando.
 not know.1SG.PRES how.much.SUP.M.PL year.PL fight.GER

‘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
 by their participation.PL in not know.1SG.PRES

cuantísimas empresas
 how.much.SUP.F.PL business

‘From their participations in **an awful lot of businesses**’

(19) blog, <http://www.tenemostetas.com/>, 29 March 2013:

cuando me llegó tu texto a través
 when me reach.3SG.PRET your text at through

de fcbk no sé cuantísimas
 of Facebook not know.1SG.PRES how.much.SUP.F.PL

veces seguidas lo leí
 time.PL follow.PTC.F.PL it read.1SG.PRET

‘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
 this.F.SG be.3SG.PRES a.F woman REL

lleva no se sabe
 carry.3SG.PRES not REFL know.3SG.PRES

cuantísimo tiempo con el novio
 how.much.SUP.M.SG time with the.M.SG boyfriend

‘She’s a woman who has been dating her boyfriend for **an awfully long time**’

(21) blog, <http://dmcforum.mforos.com/>, 28 April 2007:

simples *palabras* *que* *no* *se* *sabe*
 simple.PL word. PL REL not REFL know.3SG.PRES

cuantísimo ***daño*** *pueden* *hacer*
 how.much.SUP.M.SG damage can.3PL do

'simple words that can inflict **an awful lot of damage**'

(22) blog, <http://www.mundodeportivo.com/opinion/>, 25 May 2017:

por *primera* *vez* *en* ***no*** ***se*** ***sabe***
 for first.F.SG time in not REFL know.3SG.PRES

cuantísimos ***años***
 how.much.SUP.M.PL year.PL

'for the first time in **many many years**'

(23) blog, <http://endeconstruccion.blogspot.ch/>, 28 October 2005:

ese *gran* *actor* *nominado* ***no*** ***se***
 that.M.SG great.M actor nominate.PTC.M.SG not REFL

sabe ***cuantísimas*** ***veces*** *a* *numerosos*
 know.3SG how.much.SUP.F.PL time.PL to numerous.M.PL

premios
 award.PL

'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:

(24) blog <https://duendesjuguetones.blogspot.ch/>, 23 January 2009:

nuestro *gran* *cuadro* *Pollock* (*que*
 our.M.SG great.M painting PN REL

lleva *expuesto* *en* *el* *cole*
 carry.3SG.PRES exhibit.PTC in the.M.SG high school

<i>desde</i>	<i>que</i>	<i>lo</i>	<i>hicimos</i>	<i>hace</i>	<i>ya</i>
since	that	it	make.1PL.PRET	ago	already
no	sabemos		cuantísimo		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:

<i>Sólo</i>	<i>sabes</i>		<i>que</i>	<i>estás</i>		<i>en</i>	<i>un</i>
only	know.2SG.PRES		that	be.2SG.PRES		in	a.M
<i>lugar</i>	<i>a</i>	no	sabes		cuantísimos		
place	at	not	know.2SG.PRES		how.much.SUP.M.PL		
miles	de	metros	<i>sobre</i>	<i>el</i>		<i>suelo</i>	
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 CUÁNT(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:

<i>No</i>	<i>sabes</i>	<i>cuantísimo</i>	<i>lamento</i>
not	know.2SG.PRES	how.much.SUP.M.SG	deplore.1SG.PRES
<i>no</i>	<i>ver=la</i>		
not	see=her		

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

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

<i>No</i>	<i>sabes</i>	<i>cuantísimas</i>	<i>ganas</i>	
not	know.2SG.PRES	how.much.SUP.F.PL	lust.PL	
<i>tengo</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>este</i>	<i>libro,</i>	<i>y</i>
have.1SG.PRES	of	this.M.SG	book	and
<i>no</i>	<i>sabes</i>	<i>cuantísimo</i>	<i>sufro</i>	<i>por</i>
not	know.2SG.PRES	how.much.SUP.M.SG	suffer.1SG	by
<i>no</i>	<i>encontrar=lo</i>	<i>por</i>	<i>aquí.</i>	
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:

<i>Ella</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>sabe</i>	<i>cuantísimo</i>	<i>la</i>
she	not	know.3SG.PRES	how.much.SUP.M.SG	her
<i>necesito</i>	<i>en</i>	<i>mi</i>	<i>vida!!!</i>	
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:

<i>No</i>	<i>sabéis</i>	<i>cuantísimo</i>	<i>os</i>	<i>lo</i>
not	know.2PL.PRES	how.much.SUP.M.SG	you.PL.OBJ	it
<i>agradecemos.</i>				
thank.1PL.PRES				

'You (pl.) don't know how very grateful we are to you because of this.'

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

<i>No</i>	<i>sabía</i>	<i>cuantísimo</i>	<i>trabajo</i>	<i>y</i>
not	know.1SG.IPF	how.much.SUP.M.SG	work	and
<i>dedicación</i>	<i>lleva</i>	<i>detrás.</i>		
dedication	carry.3SG.PRES	behind		

‘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 obligatoriousness, 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 mогоllón 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 *cuantísima 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*.

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