In this paper, we will see if it is possible for bare plurals to appear in the topic positions in German and Italian. Moreover, we will compare bare plurals with definite plurals in the topic position in different constructions creating and sustaining the left periphery (together with possibly different types of movements): Topicalization (including Italian “Left Dislocation”, ILD hereafter), Hanging Topic Left Dislocation or correlative types of Left Dislocation (CLLD in Italian is usually included in this category besides GLD in German).

Based on this comparison, we make a descriptive generalization that definite and bare plurals are distributed differently in Italian and German topic positions: In German, the bare plural is used for the kind reading, whereas the definite plural prevailingly refers to individuals (anaphorically or situation bound) (1). By contrast, in Italian definite plurals can be a kind expression as shown in (2a). In addition, (2b), which is the data extracted from an Italian written corpus, suggests that bare plurals can also denote kinds as discourse topics when they are left-dislocated with a clitic, *ne*, even though they cannot do so in argument positions as pointed out by Chierchia (1998).


‘(The) operas of 17th century, I saw them all.’

(2) a. Le formiche bianche, le ho viste nel mio giardino. ‘White ants, I saw in the garden.’  


‘Children, do you want? I am planning. We began to try to do it a few months ago.’

These data are problematic for the neo-Carsonian approaches: If the down-operator were not blocked, definite plurals in the kind reading would be also expected in (1) for German. But in reality, it is difficult to get this reading. By contrast, in Italian, it is necessary to explain what licenses bare plurals to denote kinds.

We claim that this obvious difference between German and Italian in the naturalness of bare plural topics is also construction-dependent. For example in German, bare plurals as well as definite plurals are compatible with the kind-reading when it comes to the normal prefield topicalization (3).

(3) (Die) Pandabären sind vom Aussterben bedroht. (Dayal 2004)

‘(The) pandas are facing extinction.’

To the contrary, there is an obvious contrast between pronominal CLLD (4) and *ne*-CLLD (5) in Italian wrt. the permission of bare plurals (Zamparelli 1995). Especially in case of the topic with a preposition *di* as in (5), the bare plural is associated with the partitive construction (cf. Zamparelli 2008) and clearly interpreted under the kind reading (see (1) for the GLD case in German):

(4) ?(I) cani, li ho visti. ‘I saw (the) dogs.’

(5) (Di) Gatti, ne ho visti. ‘I saw cats.’

The permission of bare plurals in the topic position is problematic for Zamparelli’s as well as Chierchia’s and Dayal’s analyses. Our answer to this problem is composed of several components: (i)
Topic positions are interpreted prevalingly as definites or specific indefinites although it is possible that quantified indefinite is located in the topic position (Ebert et al. 2012). (ii) Bare plurals consist of language- and construction-specific operators. (iii) What is left-dislocated reflects what is regarded as a Question under Discussion (QuD) in Roberts (1996)'s term. (iv) The definite article in this position is used either in the domain of individuals (for the situation bound reading) or in the domain of kinds (cf. Dayal 2004). (v) The ne-CLLD can be used to mark a frame-setting topic, which presupposes a different discourse organization from the pronominal CLLD (with a definite topic), which is less restricted on discourse organizations.

We propose that in denoting kinds, Italian bare plurals in topic positions are licensed under two conditions: (i) Bare plurals are dislocated as frame-setting topics. I.e., bare plurals are used in the out-of-the-blue context and speech participants have achieved a certain domain goal. In this case, what we call kind-specificity licenses kind readings. This is the result of specificity on the kind level required by the topic position and enabled by accommodation by the hearer. This accommodation is possible because of the familiarity of kinds both to the speaker and the hearer. (ii) Otherwise, it is possible that bare plurals denote a kind when they are located in contexts which provide a kind-related QuD. That is, the queried kind is located within a domain composed of kinds. In this case, bare plurals are licensed to refer to kinds since the QuD sufficiently restricts a domain in which a possible answer varies.

In sum, information packing is reflected in syntax. This idea is basically the same as Vallduvi’s (Vallduvi 1993). In information packaging, left dislocated elements are interpreted as topics. However, we claim that topic-comment and focus-background are two different dimensions. Moreover, according to QuD, different types of topics are used. Types of topics are correlated with types of left dislocation. It is types of topic and left dislocation that affect variety of nominal interpretations. In all, so-called “left dislocations” are not simple topicalization device, but they should be regarded as reflecting complex information packaging and very sensitive to QuD or information structure.

To conclude, different demands on foregoing contexts are organized as constructions, as far as the left periphery is concerned. From this viewpoint, the information packaging is not only packaging of the own sentence, but also one of the foregoing context. Some constructions affect semantic interpretation of nominals. This mechanism is responsible for why nominals in the left periphery are interpreted differently from those in argument positions or predicate positions, where Chierchia’s parameters are viable.