

Counting and plurality

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In English and many other so-called count/mass languages, plural morphology (plurality) and direct modification by numerals (countability) are usually associated with the same nouns “count nouns”, as in *cat/cats/three cats* vs. *oxygen/oxygens/three oxygens*. Mass nouns may under certain interpretations occur with both plural morphology and numerals as in *coffee/three coffees*, acquiring in addition all the other properties associated with count nouns, e.g. they can be complements of distributive quantifiers as in *Every coffee you buy will cost you 5 euros*. The association of plurality and countability is taken to be non-arbitrary, see e.g. Chierchia 1998.

Recent research has made us aware that plurality and countability are not necessarily associated with each other. Wilhem (2008) drew our attention to languages with a mass/count distinction (not all nouns are countable), but without a singular/plural distinction. In Turkish (Görgülü 2010) and Hungarian (Dékány 2011), despite the contrast between singular and plural morphology, numerals modify bare nouns or classifier phrases and not plural nouns.

In this talk I want to focus on a different dissociation between countability and plurality: nouns which can pluralize but which cannot be counted. Tsoulas (2006) drew attention to this phenomenon in Greek, but without giving a semantic analysis. Doron and Müller (2013) draw attention to pluralized mass nouns in Hebrew which have a so called ‘abundance reading’. But more interesting for theories of countability are cases where plurality is interpreted with some version of its ‘normal’ interpretation i.e. plural items vs. singular item, but where the pluralized noun cannot be counted. Epstein Naveh (2015) described a class of mass nouns in Hebrew including *gešem* ‘rain’, *šeleg* ‘snow’ and *nezeq* ‘damage’, which can be pluralized in high register, with an apparently pluractional interpretation, denoting many events of rain or snow falling or of damage being caused. However, the plural noun cannot be modified by a numeral. Ghaniabadi (2012) suggests something similar for some nouns in Farsi. Recent work on Brazilian languages has revealed an even wider uses of non-countable plurals. In a number of languages e.g. Sakurabiat, there is a mass/count distinction, and mass nouns cannot be modified by numerals. Mass nouns can be pluralized with a plurality-of-portions interpretation, but these pluralized mass nouns cannot be modified by numerals (Galucio and Costa 2017). In the talk, I will describe these data and discuss the implications for theories of countability.

References

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