Count/ mass asymmetries

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The term mass/count distinction, despite its success as a name for a domain of research, may well be a misnomer in the sense that it suggests symmetry between mass and count that is not supported by cross-linguistic data (cf. the call for this conference). In this talk I will discuss a number of asymmetries between count and mass all of which suggest that count is more important and more prominent than mass. Based on these asymmetries, I will push the idea that mass should not be seen as an independent linguistic property, but rather as the absence of a property.

First of all, whereas there is strong evidence that an opposition between count and mass meanings plays an important role in the lexicon even of languages that seem at first 'mass only', there do seem to exist count-only languages (see in particular Lima's work on Yudja). During the talk I will discuss Deal's (2017) recent arguments against this claim (and in favor of the universality of the mass/count distinction), and argue that these arguments are not conclusive.

Second, in languages with a lexical mass/count distinction, there seem to be asymmetries between count and mass meanings, for instance in the way mismatches occur between grammatical properties and meaning. In a number marking language such as English or Dutch, count meanings for grammatical mass nouns (e.g. *furniture*) are quite common, while the opposite seems much more limited (e.g. *oats*).

A third asymmetry between count and mass is related to the sensitivity of quantity expressions to count and mass meaning and count morphology. A main distinction can be made between quantity expressions that only combine with expressions that have a count denotation and ones that are indifferent with respect to the type of meaning a noun has. The status of mass-only quantity expressions (such as *a bit*) will be discussed and I will argue that these are different from count-only quantity expressions.

A final asymmetry is related to grammatical morphemes and the expression of count vs. mass. The distinction between sortal classifiers and mensural classifiers (classifiers and massifiers in the terminology of Cheng & Sybesma 1998) is quite instructive in this respect: whereas the sortal classifiers can be argued to be sensitive to count meaning, mensural classifiers or massifiers are sensitive to the absence thereof. Both sortal classifiers and number markers are frequently found grammatical markers that are associated with the presence of count meaning. Grammatical elements that are in a similar way related to mass meaning seem to be rare.

I will argue that the linguistic importance of count, atomic meaning both for nouns and for selectional properties of grammatical expressions (number markers, quantity expressions) reflects the cognitive salience of countable units (objects, agents) and counted quantities (number) in core knowledge systems (see Spelke and Kinzler, 2007 for an overview).

Selected references

Cheng, Lisa, and Rint Sybesma. 1998. yi-wan tang, yi-ge tang: classifiers and massifiers. *The Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 28:385-412.

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