



May
7–9
2018

RUHR-
UNIVERSITÄT
BOCHUM
Germany

INVITED
SPEAKERS

GENNARO CHIERCHIA
Harvard University,
USA

JENNY DOETJES
Universiteit Leiden,
The Netherlands

SUSAN ROTHSTEIN
Bar Ilan University,
Israel

Call for Papers: The Count-Mass Distinction: A Linguistic Misunderstanding?

Numerous publications bear witness that the count/mass distinction is a prominent topic in linguistic research. Despite its prominence, the distinction is elusive, and several key issues have not yet been resolved.

On the semantic side, some authors presuppose that count nouns make atomic denotations available in language (cf. Link 1983; Chierchia 1998, 2000; Rothstein 2010). Some of these approaches have been challenged by the homogeneous structure of count nouns like *fence* and *wall*.

Additionally there are the so-called fake mass nouns, object mass nouns or superordinates such as *furniture*, *silverware* or *lingerie* that provide denotations with an atomic structure but unlike count nouns they do not make their atoms available in language.

Even though Rothstein (2010) manages to solve these problems by introducing contextually related atomicity, it remains unclear what the very concepts *count* and *mass* mean apart from making atomic structure available. In Rothstein's approach, the burden is shifted to a contextual function, which, however, seems to be present in every usage of at least some nouns.

While the aforementioned approaches are based on compositional semantic analyses, syntactic approaches such as Borer's 2005 treatment of plurals as divisions have shed new light on interesting areas, but fail to integrate compositionality. A peculiar puzzle for the role of number in syntax and semantics is the fact that 'mass' nouns sometimes can denote pluralic entities, but require singular number agreement in many languages. This observation has severe implications for approaches as diverse as the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 2005) and HPSG (Pollard and Sag 1994) – both approaches assume that *number* is an interpretable feature.

The uncertainty around the count/mass distinction is further exacerbated by the observation that a binary distinction may not be able to account for the full range of data. Although Allan (1980) has already shown that nouns do not necessarily occur in all contexts that are usually labeled syntactically as 'count' or 'mass', the variation among nouns has been ignored with the exception of so-called *dual life nouns*, i.e. nouns that are both count and mass.

Recent empirical research by Kiss et al. (2016) has put this issue on the fore again, by pointing out nouns that may be pluralized, but may not occur together with an indefinite determiner (e.g. *additive*, *disadvantage*, *therapy* and *punishment*), and also nouns that may occur together with an indefinite determiner, but may not be pluralized (*blush*, *bosom* and *front*).



ABSTRACTS

We invite abstracts with

maximum of five pages
(plus up to one page of
references)

describing original work
in the area of the
count/mass distinction in
PDF format.

No particular style sheet
is required for the
submissions.

SUBMISSION DEADLINE

October 4th, 2017
23:59 GMT+1

Email to:
tibor@linguistics.rub.de

NOTIFICATION OF ACCEPTANCE

November 15th, 2017

ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

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Similar problems emerge if immediate grammatical consequences of a count/mass distinction are considered.

Many grammarians assume e.g. that singular count nouns require the presence of a determiner; but a closer look into the literature reveals that the relationship between determiners and nouns is either one of stipulation (if not circularity), or even reversed, so that we could instead conclude that determiners of a certain type need “count nouns” as their complement, but not that the nouns actually require the presence of a determiner (as e.g. in Chierchia 1998).

Finally, broader typological research has shown that the count/mass distinction is not a necessary property of the grammar system (cf. Wiltschko 2012, Mathieu 2012, Lima 2014, 2016).

Many linguists and philosophers have some intuitive idea of a count/mass distinction, but formal theories eventually have to map their count/mass distinction to another arbitrary property. Lost in this process is the possibility that a binary distinction may be observationally and descriptively inadequate.

The purpose of this conference is to critically examine what we know about the count/mass distinction, and ideally to provide ideas and evidence that puts research on the count/mass distinction on a new level – even if this means that the count/mass distinction is replaced by alternative concepts.

NON-EXCLUSIVE LIST OF TOPICS

- What do we gain if we replace the locus of the count/mass distinction from the lexical level to the phrasal level or to the sub-lexical level, i.e. by evoking *senses*?
- Is it possible to provide a formal account of the count/mass distinction that does not rely on a functional relation between singularities and pluralities?
- What impact would it have on the count/mass distinction if we examined grammatical properties of count nouns independently (i.e. considering occurrences with indefinite determiners and plural inflections as independent properties *shared* by a subset of the nouns)?
- What should be the status of *readings* of noun-occurrences that have played a role in the mass/count literature: *Grinding* (“armadillo all over the road”), *Portioning* (“three beers on the table”), *Sorting* (“eight beers on tap”), *Evaluating* (“too much car for the average driver”)?
- What is the relationship between mass/count as applied to *concrete nouns* vs. *abstract nouns*?

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in Bochum?

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