

On the mass/count distinction in Ojibwe

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Ojibwe, an Algonquian language spoken in parts of Canada and in parts of the United States, is interesting to study in relation to the category number, and for measurability in general, because it has been argued in the literature that there is no grammaticized mass/count distinction in that language. Consider for example the quotes in (1) and (2) taken from the functionalist literature.

- (1) “Or consider the Algonquian language Ojibway (Richard Rhodes 1990:153-4, and personal communications). Nouns which might be expected not to have a plural do in fact form plurals freely, interestingly with the unit reading and not with the sort reading. Thus *mkwam* ‘ice’ or ‘piece of ice’, *mkwamiig* (plural) ‘pieces of ice’. Rhodes is unable to find a noun that cannot be pluralized in Ojibway.”
(Corbett 2000:87)
- (2) “In Ojibwa there is no grammatical distinction like the mass/count distinction of Indo-European. Thus *mkwam* can equally mean ‘ice’ or ‘a piece of ice’. *Nbiish* can mean ‘water’ or ‘an amount of water.’”
(Rhodes 1990:153)

Although Corbett (2000) does not go as far as claiming that Ojibwe does not have a grammaticized count/mass distinction, since his remarks on Ojibwe are integrated in a discussion on the systematic possibility of unit readings from the pluralisation of nouns, Rhodes’ (1990) original statement is definitely much stronger in that what is claimed is that Ojibwe has no grammaticized count/mass distinction.

Ojibwe is not the only Amerindian language which has warranted this sort of conclusion. It has been claimed that there is no grammaticized mass/count distinction in Hopi (Whorf 1939), Lillooet Salish (Davis and Matthewson 1999) or Halkomelem Salish (Wiltschko 2007). In order to account for the facts in Halkomelem Salish, Wiltschko (2007) argues that while English has a Num projection in the nominal domain, this projection is absent in Halkomelem Salish. Instead, plural marking in that language is argued to be a modifier attached to a nominal root rather than a functional head. This means that nouns in that language can be individuated without the presence of Num.

Based on fieldwork done with the community at Cape Croker, I show in this paper that there *is* a grammaticized mass/count distinction in Ojibwe, and that the category Num is therefore projected in that language. Not all nouns can be pluralized in Ojibwe: some mass nouns resist pluralisation, essentially inanimate nominals denoting liquids. The fact remains, however, that on the one hand, Ojibwe tolerates the pluralisation of many terms that would be mass in English and in other languages, and on the other, that singular nouns that are usually cross-linguistically mass can have a ‘piece of’ reading (*mkwam* ‘ice’ or ‘piece of ice’) in addition to their mass interpretation.

Framed around the recent discussion on lexical plurals (Acquaviva 2008), I will show that pluralized mass nouns in Ojibwe do not necessarily receive the typical aspectual reading that is obtained in other languages with pluralized mass nouns (French,

English, Hebrew, Salish, etc.) and that, although similar to the facts described for Indo-European languages of ancient attestation it is possible for mass nouns in Ojibwe to be pluralized with a dividing meaning. In Latin, Sanskrit and Classical Greek this process depends on the noun that is being used and is not systematic. On the other hand, it is shown that in Ojibwe the process is systematic and very productive, so much so that it leads me to propose that in addition to the plural (Borer 2005), in the absence of a determiner and of a classifier (as is the case in Ojibwe), the singular can be used as a stuff divider.

Beyond the empirical claim that I am making, namely that the count/mass distinction is grammaticized in Ojibwe after all, my paper has thus a clear theoretical significance in that it provides evidence for the idea that the singular can be portioning. The analysis I will give for the Ojibwe facts is thus based on Borer's recent work on mass terms and the structure of the nominal domain. Borer (2005) proposes that all nouns in all languages denote undivided stuff, and are in need of being portioned out before they can interact with the count system. Ojibwe provides direct evidence for the idea that number is a stuff divider, but while Borer's analysis applies to plurals only (singular bare nouns raise to the specifier of D), I propose that the category singular number also acts as a stuff divider in Ojibwe, and possibly in other Algonquian languages.