

Some Old Things and Some New Stuff about Mass and Count Nouns

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It is said that many languages, such as English, make a distinction within the nominal system between *count* and *mass*. This distinction is said to be both syntactic and semantic: There are some syntactic constructions that allow one but not the other (examples such as *three people* vs. **three waters* are given), and the semantic properties of count nouns differ from those of mass nouns (count nouns are true of whole objects and groups of them, it is said, while mass terms are true of non-individuated stuff and all its parts).

But these accounts can be challenged. The syntactic tests actually fail: (almost?) all nouns can be used in both the count-classifying constructions and the mass-classifying constructions. (Most nouns can naturally occur in either manner; and there is also the universal grinder and packager. Theorists who wish to uphold the syntactic characterization often overlook the first point, and they like to call results of the Grinder “merely a coercion” — thinking thereby that this fact need not be given any further account at all.)

But the semantic tests are also suspect: there just are no commonalities (and no commonality) among the semantic values of mass terms. Further, there are plenty of cases where what is intuitively the same physical aspect of reality is referred to by both (what are claimed to be) a mass noun and a count noun. Again against the semantic criterion, it can be pointed out that the same aspect of reality is described by what is alleged to be a mass noun in one language but a count term in another, even when the languages are very closely related. There is the further fact that some languages (are alleged to) have no such distinction within lexical nouns.

These are the challenges as I see the field: in languages like English, one feels that the count/mass distinction is syntactic in nature, even though there seems to be no syntactic construction that successfully distinguishes them. One also feels that there is an important difference in the type of references that mass vs. count terms have. Yet it seems that there is no such difference to be found.

I want to propose a way through this jungle.