

Aspects of individuation

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This paper reports on our ongoing work on the features of nominals, focussing on the mass–count distinction and the position and realization of featural number.

English has often been described as permitting conversion between count and mass nominals. We show that the apparent coercibility of English nouns is really underspecification. Most English nouns are lexically unmarked for individuation, although their non-featural semantics may make them seem canonically mass (e.g. *tea*) or count (e.g. *eel*). With a number projection, nominals are interpreted as count, and without a number projection, they are interpreted as mass:

- (1) a. I'd like a [_{#P} tea], please.
b. The [_{#P} teas] of Sri Lanka are particularly nice.
c. My hovercraft is full of [_{#P} eels].
- (2) a. The cup was full of [_{NP} tea].
b. My hovercraft is full of [_{NP} eel].

Nouns like *furniture* are an exception to this generalization about English. These nouns behave in some respects like *tea*, in that they can occur as bare singulars with an unspecified-amount interpretation. However, they strenuously resist individuation by syntactic number:

- (3) a. *I ordered three furnitures from Ikea.
b. *Of all the furnitures in the world, he had to pick Louis XV.

We propose that English nouns like *furniture* spell out both N and #—essentially, they are idiomatic words. Their lexical semantics includes the information that they are collections, with the (cancellable) implicature that the collection is non-singleton, while the grammatical feature # (without a dependent plural feature) forces singular agreement. Because *furniture* itself spells out #, it cannot (following Cowper and Hall 2002) combine with any independent expression encoding number, either singular (the indefinite determiner *a(n)*) or plural (the suffix *-s*).

The existence of nouns that spell out # suggests that we should also find nouns realizing # and the plural feature > 1 —that is, words like *cattle*, which also cannot combine with *a(n)* or *-s*, but which trigger plural agreement.

- (4) a. Cattle are lowing.
b. *Cattle is lowing.
c. *A cattle is lowing.
d. *Cattles are lowing.

While the bundling of # with N as in *furniture* occurs in English only on a few exceptional lexical items, this pattern is more prevalent in other languages. In Chinese, for example, count nouns are not inflected for plural, and can be combined with numerals only with the intervention of a classifier, in much the same way that English allows one to speak of *three pieces of furniture* but not **three furniture(s)*:

- (5) a. san ben shu
 three CL book
 ‘three books’ (Mandarin; Cheng and Sybesma 1999: 514)
 b. *san shu

While some (e.g., Krifka 1995) have taken the situation illustrated in (5) to indicate that all Chinese nouns are underlyingly like English mass nouns, we follow Cheng and Sybesma in assuming that Chinese lexically distinguishes count from mass nouns. For us, count nouns are specified with #, and mass nouns are not. Chinese count nouns are thus similar to *furniture* in English (cf. Chierchia 1998).

Cheng and Sybesma show that Chinese mass nouns, unlike count nouns, cannot combine with ordinary classifiers, but only with massifiers, which supply a unit of measure. Given our proposal that Chinese count nouns have #, this distinction can be accounted for by saying that Chinese ‘mass’ nouns, like most ordinary nouns in English, lack #. The difference between Chinese ‘mass’ nouns and English unspecified nouns lies not in the features of the nouns themselves, but rather in the fact that English has a grammatical # projection that can add individuation to a noun that does not already have it, but Chinese does not.

Another typological possibility is exemplified by Edo (as described by Baker 2003). Edo also has an underlying count/mass distinction, as seen in the fact that nouns such as *èbé* (‘leaf’) and *àkhé* (‘pot’) are compatible with numerals and plural agreement, while nouns such as *àmèn* (‘water’) are not:

- (6) a. Ávbé {èbé, *àmèn} dè-lé.
 PL leaf water fall-PL
 ‘The {leaves, *water(s)} fell.’ (Edo; Baker 2003: 117)
 b. Òzó mién {àkhé, *àmèn} èvá
 Ozo find pot water two
 ‘Ozo found two {pots, *water(s)}.’ (Edo; Baker 2003: 117)

For Edo as for Chinese, we propose that count nouns have # and mass nouns lack it. The differences between Edo and Chinese are twofold: First, Edo has grammatical number, in that > 1 projects syntactically, while Chinese lacks a number projection, and has grammaticalized classifiers instead. Second, numerals in Edo (as in Hungarian) are heads, in complementary distribution with > 1 , while in Chinese they are specifiers, licensed by a classifier head. Edo differs from English in making > 1 a separate head and consistently bundling # with N, while English has > 1 as a dependent feature on the # head, which is projected separately from N except in a few idiomatic forms like *furniture*.

References

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