



Transcending the lexical vs. grammatical divide regarding the mass/count distinction. Evidence from corpus studies and acceptability surveys in French and Dutch



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ABSTRACT

The lexico-grammatical status of mass and count nouns has been extensively debated over the last decades. We discuss how the two main approaches (lexicalist and grammatical approach) both fail to account for all the properties of the distinction. An alternative lexicalist view is proposed, approaching mass and count features as probabilistic features rather than as categorical ones. Building on Allan (1980), we deployed corpus data and acceptability ratings to examine the mass-count preferences of French and Dutch nouns that allow for both a mass and count interpretation. Our findings indicate that acceptability ratings are related to corpus frequencies. More specifically, we found that attested mass usages (even with very low frequencies) of nouns are more acceptable than nouns with unattested mass usage, that more frequent mass usages are more acceptable than less frequent ones and that the degree of acceptability of a mass usage of a lexical item depends on its relative frequency in discourse. In addition, we found that acceptability ratings of mass usage are sensitive to semantic-pragmatic modulation of the sentence context.

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1. Two conflicting views on the localization of the mass/count distinction¹

In various languages, including English, French and Dutch, nouns (or noun usages) can be classified as either 'count' (or 'countable') or 'mass' (or 'uncountable'). The morpho-syntactic correlates of this distinction are relatively consensual (see Gillon, 1999; Nicolas, 2002 for English and French, respectively). For instance, in English count syntax is associated with quantifiers such as *many* and *few* (see example 1), numerals (2), the indefinite article *a(n)* (*a car*) (3) and the plural.² In contrast, mass syntax is associated with *much* and *less* (4), unstressed *some* (5) and bare usage (6).

- (1) My sister has **many children**.
- (2) There are **three trees** in my yard.
- (3) There's **a car** in front of the house.
- (4) We don't have **much time**.

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² Note that both diagnostics do not converge in the case of so-called lexical plurals such as *measles*, *clothes*, etc. These plural forms exhibit various degrees of count deficiency as shown by distributional incompatibilities with (some) indefinite determiners. See Acquaviva (2008), Alexiadou (2011) and Lauwers (2014) for a discussion.

- (5) Put **some [sm] butter** on it.
- (6) He likes **wine**.

While the mass-count distinction seems intuitively clear-cut, it poses various theoretical challenges, such as the issue of motivation vs. arbitrariness (Wierzbicka, 1988), the formalized semantic description of mass and count denotations (Link, 1983; Lønning, 1987; Bale and Barner, 2009), the relevance of the distinction outside of the nominal domain (Kleiber, 1989; Khallouqi, 2003) and the representation of the mass-count distinction in the language system. This last issue, which actually concerns the lexical or grammatical status of mass and count features, constitutes the focus of this article.

The issue at hand pertains to the matter of ‘mass-count flexibility’ or the fact that many nouns can be used in both mass and count syntax, as illustrated in examples (7) to (9).

- (7) (a) We drank **beer** all night long. (Mass)
- (b) We had a few **beers** last night. (Count)
- (8) (a) There’s **sand** in my shoes. (Mass)
- (b) This beach has a very fine-grained **sand**. (Count)
- (9) (a) I bought a new **cat**; its name is Tiger. (Count)
- (b) The truck driver didn’t see Tiger, and now there’s **cat** all over the road! (Mass)

Two opposing approaches exist to account for this ‘mass-count flexibility’: the lexicalist and the grammatical approach.

The lexicalist view maintains that nouns are lexically marked as either mass, count, or as a combination of both, in which case the noun is considered polysemous (Kleiber, 1999) and sometimes called a ‘dual-life’ noun (Kiss et al., 2014). The lexicalist view is also taken by Langacker (2002 [1990]: 70) who explicitly opposes the level of the lexical head and the level of the whole NP. The lexical count-mass status is further taken to be either marked directly (Gillon, 1999; Nicolas, 2002; Cheng et al., 2008; Kulkarni et al., 2013) or as a combination of several minimal lexical features (Landman, 2011; Zhang, 2013).

In the lexicalist view, mass-count flexibility is explained in terms of transfer functions, or morpho-syntactic shifts occurring in discourse and entailing semantic effects (from mass to count, or vice versa). These effects have been described in terms of metaphorical machines, such as the “Universal Pack(ag)er” (count usages of mass nouns to denote ‘portions’, as in (7); Bunt, 1985, Galmiche, 1989, Jackendoff, 1991), the “Universal Sorter” (count usages of mass nouns to denote ‘sorts’, as in (8); Bunt, 1985) and the “Universal Grinder” (mass usages of count nouns to denote ‘ground stuff’, as in (9); Pelletier, 1975). Similar effects have been defined in the framework of the Generative Lexicon, either as “lexical Implication Rules” (Ostler and Atkins, 1992) or as “subtype coercion” (Pustejovsky, 1995). For French, additional metaphorical machines have been suggested, including that of “Universal Multiplier” (*Multiplieur Universel*, colloquial mass usages of count nouns to denote collections, as in (10), which are quite similar to the so-called *wall-paper readings* (Cheng et al., 2008); Galmiche, 1989) and “Universal Collector” (*Collecteur Universel*, plural usages of mass nouns to denote undetermined collections of objects, as in (11); Vermote, 2014d).

- (10) *Le week-end dernier, on a fait du kilomètre!*
Last weekend, one AUX made PART.ART kilometer
‘Last weekend, we walked for many kilometers!’
- (11) *A combien peut-on revendre ses métaux chez le ferrailleur?*
At how.much can one resell one’s metals at the scrap metal dealer’s?
‘How much are old pieces of metal worth at the scrap metal dealer’s?’

Especially in a conceptualist view such as the one held by cognitive linguists, these “extensions” are particularly powerful as they are backed up by what is called *imagery* (Langacker, 1987), i.e. the multiple ways language can conceptualize the same reality by “a shift in the profiling of essentially the same domain” (Twardzisz, 1998: 249). As stated by Taylor (2002: 379): “A noun will be used as count or mass to the extent that the conceptualization can be brought under the appropriate schema”.

In contrast to the lexicalist view, proponents of the ‘grammatical’ approach argue that lexical items are undetermined as to the mass-count distinction and that mass and count features arise at the level of the Noun Phrase (NP) and thus through syntax. The rationale behind this analysis is that ‘by definition’ the lexicon only contains invariable features (such as gender, in gender-marking languages); the mass-count flexibility cannot be part of the lexicon. This position was already held, for instance, by Damourette & Pichon (1911–1927 [1950]), Gleason (1965), Weinreich (1966), Sharvy (1978), Pelletier (1975, 2012), and has recently been defended by Borer (2005) and other scholars who explicitly refer to her influential monograph (Bale and Barner, 2009; De Belder, 2011). Borer’s grammatical view maintains that nominal roots (in all languages) are unmarked with respect to mass and count features but that mass is the default interpretation of all nouns and that count interpretations arise through syntactic derivation. Pelletier (2012), on the other hand, claims that lexical items are specified both for count and mass.

Although both approaches are backed up by solid theoretical arguments, they both also have notable shortcomings. One problem for the grammatical view is that it fails to account for the fact that most nouns have an intuitively recognizable and inter-subjectively shared preference towards one of both types of syntax (e.g., count noun *car* vs. mass noun *sand*). This must be somehow a language-specific lexical specification, as suggested by Kulkarni et al. (2013) on the basis of a rating-task on 6 languages. One solution is to take recourse to the speaker’s encyclopedic knowledge of the world (De Belder, 2011). Thus, *car*

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