
Quantity systems and the count/mass distinction

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In this talk I would like to investigate the count/mass distinction from the perspective of quantity systems. By ‘quantity system’ I mean a system of expressions in a given language that are used to indicate quantities. In the first part of the talk, I will focus on quantity systems in the nominal domain. At the end of the talk, I will briefly compare the nominal domain to the verbal domain from the perspective of the type of quantity system that is used.

Despite a number of important differences that have been at the core of the discussion on the count/mass distinction (systems with classifiers, with number marking and with neither, or both, of these), quantity systems in the nominal domain have a lot in common as well (Doetjes, 2012). One can observe that languages always have numerals and/or other expressions that indicate an absolute or vague number of items. In order to use these expressions, one needs to have UNITS that permit counting. These units may correspond to abstract or concrete units or to units of measurement. Languages also typically have expressions that are blind to the count/mass contrast: they are typically used to *measure* (see in particular Rothstein, 2009a, b for the distinction between measuring and counting). The possible units of measurement depend on the noun involved and on the grammatical properties of the language. Finally, one can often observe pairs of words one of which is only used in counting contexts, while the other avoids words that can be counted (cf. the distinction between *many* and *much*, (a) *few* and (a) *little* in English. The existence of roughly these three types of quantity expressions seems to hold, despite the differences that can be found across languages. This, I will argue, has consequences for the lexical properties of nouns in terms of the count/mass distinction.

When a comparison is made with the verbal domain, it can be observed that numerals and quantity expressions of the ‘counting’ type hardly ever allow for a direct combination with a verb phrase, and in order to use them for verb phrase modification, a classifier-like element (cf. English *times*) has to be inserted. I will claim that this is not a ‘verbal classifier’ but rather that the numeral and the classifier constitute a complete nominal structure that functions as an adverbial phrase. As such, counting typically makes use of nominal structures.

References

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