
Fruits and vegetables in French: a fresh look on systematic mass-count flexibility

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In French, names for fruits and vegetables can generally accommodate both count and mass usages, depending on whether they are used to denote inherently bounded, individuated objects (*un citron, des potirons, trois pommes*) or edible substances, tastes, or other homogenous aspects (*du citron, du potiron, de la pomme*). Since fruits and vegetables “ontologically” are individuated objects, a naïve account of this flexibility would simply be that the count use be default, and the mass use be the result of some kind of transfer or “coercion” – in line with most accounts of, e.g., the morphosyntactic flexibility of names of “edible animals” (*cf.* Ostler & Atkins 1991, Nunberg & Zaenen 1992, Copestake & Briscoe 1995, Kleiber 1999, Nicolas 2002).

We examined this issue by conducting a vast corpus-research (based on data from WebCorp) on the actual use of names of fruits and vegetables in French. On the one hand, we looked at the behavior of the 12 most frequent nouns in the category, on the other we examined 18 lexical items taken from three distinct botanic sub-categories (*Liliaceae Allium, Rutaceae Citrus, Cucurbitaceae*). We analyzed both quantitative patterns (distribution) and qualitative patterns (semantic effects). From this study, we learnt: 1) that, besides the expected count use, nouns denoting fruits and vegetables are indeed readily used as mass nouns, with diverse semantic implications (that can be described, in essence, as an “indeterminacy in form and quantity”), and 2) that these mass occurrences, although much less frequent than their count counterparts, do not pose any problem of acceptability, with certain contexts actually requiring them. Moreover, as far as the internal coherence of the group of names under scrutiny is concerned, we observed: 1) that each item has its own distributional profile, with some (variable) degree of flexibility being the only constant, 2) that, nevertheless, the contexts most prone to mass usage are the same across items, and 3) that the notable inflexible behavior of certain “outsiders” (*ciboulette, ail, calebasse, cornichon*) goes hand in hand with a situation in the periphery of the (semantic-pragmatic) group of fruits and vegetables.

These observations lead us to propose an original model of the morphosyntactic flexibility of the names of fruits and vegetables (potentially applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to other flexible lexical domains). We postulate that:

1. knowledge of the morphosyntactic behavior of lexical items is primarily lexicon-based, and emerges “bottom-up”, from individual experience (*cf.* distributional patterns);
2. the way this distributional knowledge is applied is sensitive to (experiential) context of use and encyclopedic knowledge, which means that language users are expected to generalize morphosyntactic patterns by analogy between (permanent or episodic) members of super-lexical semantic-pragmatic categories, when relevant.

In this view, (most) nouns for fruits and vegetables in French are both mass and count, but inherit each sense in a different way. More specifically, according to what we call the ‘Principle of double inheritance’, they are count on the lexical level, by virtue of certain ontological characteristics of their referents, while mass as members of the pragmatic-semantic class of “fruits and vegetables” (in the common, ‘culinary’, sense of these terms). As such, both usages are supposedly equally part of the semantic system of the language (hence the equal acceptability), without being both ‘lexicalized’ – in the narrow sense of that term.

References

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