

A cross-linguistic *mass* default for object-denoting nouns? Findings from a multilingual Berlin market

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The nominal mass/count distinction constitutes an interesting challenge from the point of view of the syntax-semantics interface. With respect to nominal meaning, it relates to a two-fold distinction of nominal referents as objects vs. substances, which can be distinguished, e.g., as entities conceptualised as (non-)divisible, or whose internal structure is considered (non-)arbitrary (for instance Prasada 1996). The two classes are illustrated in (1) vs. (2):

- (1) Sarah had **a guest**. (object: non-arbitrary internal structure)
- (2) They drank **wine**. (substance: arbitrary internal structure)

In such languages as German or English, this binary distinction of nominal referents can be associated with a binary distinction at the morphosyntactic level, between ‘count’ nouns that require plural marking when referring to more than one instance of the nominal referent and will be accompanied by a determiner if they occur in non-plural form, and ‘mass’ nouns that can occur without number marking in bare NPs. Hence, while the ‘mass’ noun *wine* in (2) above appears without number marking and determiner, the ‘count’ noun *guest* in (1) is accompanied by the indefinite article, and it would be pluralised (*guests*) for reference to more than one person.

While this suggests a one-to-one mapping of semantic/conceptual and morphosyntactic distinctions, reference to objects can also be accomplished by nouns that behave like ‘mass’ nouns in the sense that they do not require plural marking or a determiner (cf. Rothstein 2010; 2017 on object ‘mass’ nouns). (3) illustrates this with the Persian counterpart to (1):

- (3) Sarah **mešmān** dāšt. (object)
Sarah guest had

Unlike the English noun in (1), its Persian counterpart in (3) does not require a determiner or number marking. While nominal number marking is available in Persian, it is not obligatory for object-denoting nouns: Persian nouns are *transnumeral* in the sense of transcending English-style number dichotomies (cf. Greenberg 1974).

Hence, in this pattern, the group of nouns that behave morphosyntactically as ‘mass’ covers object-reference as well as substance-reference. This is typical for so-called “classifier languages”, where in cardinal counting constructions, the cardinal numeral is followed by a classifier. The numeral classifier system can constitute a fine-grained and large set (e.g., in Mandarin), but it can also converge towards one or a few generalised elements (such as the generalised classifier *tane* in Turkish), and classifiers need not necessarily be overt (e.g., they are optional in Turkish or Persian).

As the examples for languages with classifiers illustrate, transnumeral nominal patterns are possible in a typologically large and diverse range of languages, making transnumeral nouns a pervasive phenomenon in the languages of the world. What is more, object-denoting transnumeral ‘mass’ nouns are also available in languages that are generally considered non-classifier languages, such as German or English, cf. (4) vs. (5):

- (4) Sarah bought four hundred **cows**. (object / ‘count’)
- (5) Sarah bought four hundred **head of cattle** (object / ‘mass’)

Such morphosyntactic ‘mass’ behaviour of some object-denoting nouns can be restricted to specific varieties within a language, leading to minimal pairs as illustrated in (6) and (7), from Standard German vs. Bavarian German, respectively:

- (6) Sarah braucht **Geld**. ('mass')
Sarah needs money
- (7) Sarah braucht **à Gäid**. ('count')
Sarah needs a money

Finally, diachronic changes within a language can lead to object-denoting nouns moving from 'count' to 'mass', as in the development from Old Persian to Modern Persian, or in the opposite direction, as witnessed in the diachrony of German, where object-denoting nouns showed more transnumeral, 'mass' behaviour in Middle High German than at present (Wiese 2011).

Taken together, this suggests, for one, that the morphosyntactic distinction of 'mass' vs. 'count' for object-denoting nouns does not primarily hold at the level of languages; rather, both options can be available within a language, with different distributions. Accordingly, the denotations of nouns might be more similar across 'mass' and 'count' (and thus also across languages) than generally thought, making them more flexible and open for language variation and change in the 'mass'/'count' domain. Secondly, given the broad availability of transnumeral nouns within and across languages, morphosyntactic 'mass' behaviour might be the default for object-denoting nouns.

An interesting kind of evidence for this comes from language use in a highly multilingual setting, namely a street market in Berlin that is popular with locals, visitors from other parts of the city, and tourists alike. In the context of this market, both sellers and customers use a large range of linguistic resources, drawing on German as the societal majority language, English as an international language, different heritage languages (e.g., Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, Russian, and others), and the various languages that international visitors bring in. Within this linguistically rich setting, speakers combine, mix, and merge elements from different languages in a contact-linguistic practice that can be described as a multilingual mixed market jargon (Wiese to appear). I discuss linguistic patterns for nouns that emerge in this mixed setting. (8) gives an illustration for a sales pattern that allows different linearisations [*zwei* 'two'; *Stück* 'piece'; *eins* 'one', *fünfzig* – 'fifty', *drei* – 'three', *Kiste* 'box']:

- | | | | | |
|-----|-------|------------|--------------|-------|
| (8) | Mango | zwei Stück | eins fünfzig | |
| | | zwei Stück | eins fünfzig | Mango |
| | Mango | | eins fünfzig | Stück |
| | Mango | zwei Kiste | drei Euro | |

The pattern in (8) allows variation not only with respect to linearisation, but also with respect to the linguistic resources used here: while the examples in (8) are all in German, speakers also use lexical elements from other languages (in particular Turkish, but also English, Spanish, and others). Numerals, classifiers, and nouns from different languages can be combined within this pattern, suggesting something like a cross-linguistic blueprint with slots that are not restricted to lexical items from one particular language. This is also evident in other market interactions, cf. (9), where a customer of monolingual German background combines elements from both Turkish and German in his request for two eggplants (Turkish underlined):

- (9) Iki tane Aubergine, bitte.
two classifier eggplant please

What these examples have in common is that in each case, object-denoting nouns behave morphosyntactically 'mass': even though nouns like *Mango* and *Aubergine* are 'count' nouns in Standard German, they appear without number marking here and are combined with classifiers, and the same is true for nouns from other languages used in such constructions at the market.

I discuss a possible default for morphosyntactic 'mass' behaviour of object-denoting nouns, suggesting a primacy of transnumerality, and analyse the implications of such findings for our

understanding of the mass/count distinction at the level of languages vs. nouns, and the variation associated with it at the syntax-semantics interface.

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