

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 04/07/2024

16:15-17:45

<https://tau-ac-il.zoom.us/j/88204715895?pwd=aUZJ3hMGLEGhh5xjUABbOpda6o2kM0.1>

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**Against the masses:
Experimental evidence for non-uniform noun semantics in a classifier language**

Traditionally, nouns in classifier-languages (CLs) have been argued to have uniform unindividuated semantics [1,2]. Even scholars who recognize the non-uniform semantics of CL nouns assume that in CLs, the *linguistic* count-mass distinction merely aligns with the *cognitive* object-substance distinction [3,4, cf. 5]. Our study presents acceptability data from Tashkent Uzbek (TU), an obligatory CL, demonstrating that the distribution of TU modifiers is *determined* by the count-mass semantics of the modified noun. Furthermore, our findings affirm the existence of an additional, non-canonical nominal class: *object-mass nouns*. Such nouns are morphosyntactically mass, but unlike canonical mass nouns, they refer to individuals [6]. Thus, object-mass nouns represent a dissociation between the linguistic count-mass distinction and the cognitive object-substance distinction. Under the view that in CLs, the linguistic distinction fully aligns with the cognitive distinction, such non-canonical nouns are predicted to be entirely absent in CLs such as TU. The experiment was conducted online. Manipulated variables included three DP-types (count, substance-mass, object-mass) and two modifier-types (morphosyntactic-countability modifiers; notional-individuation modifiers). 40 TU speakers provided acceptability-judgments on a 4-point scale. Acceptability ratings of count NPs were near-ceiling with both modifier-types; for substance-mass NPs, both modifier-types received low ratings. This is unexpected if TU nouns had uniform semantics. Hence, the observed response-pattern indicates that TU has two distinct nominal categories. Of particular interest is the sharp discrepancy attested for object-mass NPs: with *individuation*-probing modifiers, acceptability ratings are essentially identical to those of count NPs; conversely, when modified by *countability*-probing modifiers, object-mass NPs pattern with substance-mass NPs. Such a discrepancy demonstrates that the count-mass distinction in TU – just like in English – *transcends* the cognitive object-substance distinction. Hence, our findings pose a serious challenge for the prevailing typology of noun semantics, which assumes a fundamental distinction between number-marking languages such as English and CLs like TU.

Selected references:

- [1] Ritchie, W. (1971). On the analysis of surface nouns, *Paper in Linguistics*, 4(1), 1-16. |
- [2] Sharvy, R. (1978). Maybe English has no count nouns: notes on Chinese semantics. An essay in metaphysics and linguistics. *Studies in Language* 2(3), 345–65.
- [3] Cheng, L. & Sybesma, R. (1998). Yi-wan tang, yi-ge tang: Classifiers and massifiers. *The Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, 28(3), 385–412.
- [4] Gennaro. (2021). Mass vs. count: Where do we stand? Outline of a theory of semantic variation. In T. Kiss, F. Pelletier, & H. Husić (Eds.), *Things and Stuff: The Semantics of the Count-Mass Distinction* (pp. 21-54). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Carey, S. & Spelke, E. (1996). Science and core knowledge. *Philosophy of science*, 63(4), 515–533. |
- [6] Barner, D. & Snedeker, J. (2005). Quantity judgments and individuation: Evidence that mass nouns count. *Cognition*, 97. 41–66.

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