

**Tel-Aviv University
The School of Philosophy, Linguistics and Science Studies
Department of Linguistics**

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

**Thursday 14.01.2021
16:15-17:45**

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Counting in Brazilian Indigenous Languages

In classical theories of countability, the minimal elements in the extension of count nouns are atoms, and the material parts of these atoms are not themselves part of the extension of the nouns (cf. Link 1983, Chierchia 1998, 2010 among many others). According to these theories, grammatical atomicity (what counts as an atom for purposes of counting in language) is strongly associated with natural atomicity (what constitutes an individual of the kind described by a noun). Against this view, Rothstein (2010) argues that natural atomicity is neither required nor necessary for grammatical counting. Rothstein (2010) argues that atoms can be contextually defined. That is, count nouns like fence, wall and bouquet denote “different sets of atoms depending on the context of interpretation”. For example, what counts as a wall-atom in a particular context (the four walls of a castle that we can consider as ‘a wall’) might not count as a wall-atom in a different context (the north wall of the castle, which we can also name as ‘a wall’). Empirical facts across languages provide ample evidence that discrete individuals are not necessarily countable (see object mass nouns such as furniture in English) and that nouns that denote substances are not necessarily uncountable (cf. Mathieu 2012, Lima 2014 among many others). Such evidence suggests a dissociation between natural and semantic atomicity. In light of this debate, three questions will be addressed in this talk, based on three experimental studies with Yudja children and adults: how much does the conceptual content of a noun and natural atomicity influence how units of individuation are specified? Are units of individuation grammaticalized in the semantics of nouns? Or are units of individuation contextually/pragmatically specified? I will argue that while natural atomicity may influence what we count, we can count atoms that are contextually specified.

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