Mass nouns in a typological perspective

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This workshop aims at making a further step towards bringing the study of mass nouns more firmly into a typological perspective. Mass nouns have traditionally been treated in formal semantics (from McCawley 1975 to Filip 2021), in cognitive linguistics (e.g. Middleton et al. 2004) and acquisition studies (e.g. Soja et al. 1991), all focused on data from English in a clearly disproportionate way. More descriptive studies, too, are mostly dedicated to English or other SAE languages (Kleiber 2014). Mass nouns have not been in focus in linguistic typology, as shown, for example, by a very limited coverage of the topic in the otherwise comprehensive survey of number in Corbett 2000, and by grammars often omitting to give details of the morphosyntactic peculiarities of mass nouns. The number of research papers focussing on mass nouns in individual non-SAE languages also seems to be limited (we quote Mufwene 1980 on Lingala, Kibrik 1992 on East Caucasian, Wilhelm 2008 on Dëne Sųłiné, Davis 2014 on St'át'imets as several examples). In cross-linguistic surveys of number and numerosity, at best small fractions of the discussion are dedicated to mass nouns (again Corbett 2000, Storch and Dimmendaal 2014, Cabredo Hofherr and Doetjes 2021, Acquaviva and Daniel 2022 - and individual chapters therein; but see Keenan and Paperno 2012 where countability is more in focus). Recently, there have been typological collections dedicated to mass nouns (Massam 2012; Lima & Rothstein 2020). They strongly emphasise the need to expand language coverage. Lima and Rothstein quote, as a showcase of why it is important to include understudied languages, the impact of Wilhelm's (2008) analysis of Dëne Sųłiné on the development of formal semantic models of countability.

Still, the best studied parameters of variation remain mapped from those studied in SAE, including availability of plural marking to names of substances, semantic effects of pluralization of such nouns, their occurrence with numerals and their quantifier selectivity - together adding up to the familiar morphosyntactic notion of (un)countability. In other words, not only coverage in terms of areas and families, but also and especially in terms of grammatical phenomena accounted for, is still far from comprehensive: even when the former is extended, the latter often remains the same. Lima & Rothstein (2020) expand the study of countability to a totally new sample of languages, but at the same time explicitly indicate that their questionnaire is designed so as to test generalisations suggested in the previous, mostly formal, line of study. This indicates another dimension for collecting more empirical data: the cross-linguistic diversity of morphosyntactic behaviour of mass nouns.

Mass nouns can be defined on morphosyntactic (~uncountability, as opposed to countable nouns, cf. Bale 2021) or on conceptual (~designation of substances, as opposed to

names of individuated entities, cf. Ghomeshi and Massam 2012) grounds. Hypothetically, a language may lack mass nouns in the first sense (also because countability diagnostics may diverge); but it cannot lack them in the second sense. A methodological trap of the definition based on morphosyntax is that it necessarily prioritises some morphosyntactic properties (traditional diagnostics of countability) over others. Words expressing concepts like 'sand' or 'water' may not fall under this morphosyntactic definition of mass nouns while still showing other unexpected morphosyntactic properties. As we are interested in the latter, we define mass nouns primarily on conceptual grounds, as a class of nouns that include designations for substances as a core, as well as other nouns that morphosyntactically align with them. That leaves our eyes wide open for morphosyntactic features that do not easily follow from the existing theories of countability or, even if they do, are difficult to predict apriori, such as the unitization effect of possessive markers on mass nouns in Negidal (Aralova & Pakendorf 2023).

Some phenomena are relatively well-studied, such as recategorization effects under pluralization (Corbett's 2000 sortal and abundance plurals), partly because of their relevance to the formal semantic take on mass nouns. But some other, "unexpected" morphosyntactic observations from individual languages raise the question how frequent they are typologically. We know that, in terms of number marking or agreement, mass nouns align with singular nouns in some languages, but with plural nouns in others (e.g. Creissels 2022 on Tswana, Foley 2022 on Lower Sepik). For Welsh, Nurmio (2019) shows that some mass nouns are lexical hybrids (Corbett 2000, 2006), with a tendency to control different agreement depending on the domain. In Dargwa, in the singular some mass nouns control plural agreement and some control singular agreement; and all mass nouns also can be pluralized and then control plural agreement (Sumbatova 2018; cf. also Saeed 1999 for Somali). We are also interested in more typological evidence for the observation (discussed sporadically from Wierzbicka 1988 to Grimm 2018) that the manner with which speakers interact with an entity (e.g. as a mass, or as one by one) may influence its morphosyntactic properties.

Unitization of mass nouns remains relatively understudied. This may be achieved by phrases with minimal unit nouns (English _grain of sand_, German _Sandkorn_) (Goddard 2010), measure nouns (_glass of water_), singulative markers (Welsh _gwenyn-en_ 'a bee') (Acquaviva 2016, Haspelmath & Karjus 2017, Dali & Mathieu 2021, Nurmio 2023) classifiers and also by recategorization. The interface between mass and so-called collective nouns (a descriptive term used in e.g. Celtic linguistics for nouns denoting a plurality of entities in their most basic form) is also typologically interesting. Jaradat & Jarrah (2022) argue that these two types overlap to a different extent in different varieties of Arabic; and Nurmio (2019) observes both overlap and differences in Welsh. Collective, like mass, is a term which vexes typologists (Gil 1996, Corbett 2000, De Vries 2021), while it continues to be used freely in grammars and descriptive work, often (just like mass nouns) without elaboration as to the morphosyntactic properties of such nouns. In fact collective and mass are often mentioned together without an explicit disentanglement of the two.

We welcome abstract submissions especially on lesser-studied languages. We are looking to address the following **research questions**, with a focus on the morphosyntax of mass nouns and their constructional and derivational properties:

- **Unitization:** How do languages denote the minimal units of mass nouns (*grain of sand* type)? Are there any special morphosyntactic properties of packaging / measuring units in combination with mass nouns (*glass of water*, *eine Flasche Wein* type)?
- **Number alignment:** What is the default number form of mass nouns - singular or plural? What kind of agreement is controlled by mass nouns? What are other morphosyntactic properties that distinguish them from object nouns?
- **Further interactions:** Any peculiar, cross-linguistically unexpected interactions with grammatical categories, e.g. plural or dual, classifiers, possessive marking or gender (such as regular shifts in meaning of mass nouns in flexible gender systems)?
- **Lexical splits:** If mass nouns are split into two or more classes according to their morphosyntactic properties, some aligned with plurals and some with singulars, what underlies such splits? Are there nouns that may behave as regular nouns or mass nouns depending on the context, and what influences this choice? If mass nouns split into subclasses according to how their units are denoted, what underlies such splits?
- **Other nouns aligned with mass nouns:** What other classes of meanings show morphosyntactic behaviour similar to that of mass nouns (e.g. abstract nouns, nominalizations, 'collectives', other)?

Call for Papers

For the workshop proposal, we are asking for abstracts of up to 300 words (excluding references). Please email these (in PDF and Word format) to silva.nurmio@helsinki.fi by **13 November 2023**. If the workshop proposal is accepted by the SLE, all the preliminary workshop participants must submit their full abstracts to EasyChair by 15 January 2024. Do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions!

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