

## **Workshop proposal for SLE in Helsinki (21-24 August 2024)**

### **Mass nouns in a typological perspective**

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We make 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 experimental and acquisition studies (e.g. Lin et al. 2018, Lima 2018, Soja et al. 1991), but were focused on English and (sometimes) other SAE languages (Kleiber 2014) in a disproportionate way. Mass nouns have not generally been in focus in linguistic typology, with Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2004) being a rare exception.

Thus, the comprehensive survey of number in Corbett (2000) provides a limited coverage of the topic, and at best small fractions of the discussion are dedicated to mass nouns in cross-linguistic collections (Storch and Dimmendaal 2014, Cabredo Hofherr and Doetjes 2021, Acquaviva and Daniel 2022); but see Keenan and Paperno (2012) and several recent collections (Massam 2012, Lima & Rothstein 2020) that emphasise the need to expand language coverage. Lima and Rothstein quote, as a showcase of importance of including understudied languages, the impact of Wilhelm's (2008) analysis of Dëne Sųliné on the development of formal semantic models of countability, and emphasize the evolution of the formal semantic discussion from Chierchia (1998) to Chierchia (2010). However, research on mass nouns in non-SAE languages has been relatively limited (we quote Mufwene 1980 on Lingala, Kibrik 1992 on East Caucasian, Davis 2014 on St'át'imets as several examples).

The best studied parameters of variation remain mapped from those studied in SAE, including availability and semantic effects of plural marking to names of substances, their occurrence with numerals and their quantifier selectivity - 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 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 state that their questionnaire is designed so as to test generalisations suggested in the previous (mostly formal) research. This indicates another dimension for collecting more empirical data: more detail on 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 (or countability diagnostics may diverge); but it cannot lack them in the second sense. A methodological trap of the morphosyntactic definition is that it necessarily prioritises some properties (traditional diagnostics of countability) over others. Words expressing concepts like ‘sand’ or ‘water’ may not fall under a morphosyntactic definition of mass nouns while showing other unexpected morphosyntactic properties. We are interested in the latter, and define mass nouns primarily on conceptual grounds, including 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 follow from the existing theories of countability or are at least difficult to predict *a priori*, such as the unitization effect of possessive markers on mass nouns in Negidal or “count / mass agreement” in certain non-standard varieties of Germanic and Romance (Aralova & Pakendorf 2023; Siemund 2006; see also Lima 2018).

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, less expected morphosyntactic observations from individual languages raise the question how frequent they are cross-linguistically. 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 (Creissels 2022 on Tswana, Foley 2022 on Lower Sepik, and Corbett 2019). 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 can be pluralized (Sumbatova 2018; cf. Saeed 1999 for Somali); splits with numeral modification have been reported for North American Indian languages (e.g. Wiltschko 2012).

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 also 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 (Kambaata *maal-ch-ú* ‘a piece of meat’, Treis 2014; on singulatives cf. 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 in 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 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 (but see Rijkhoff, *forth.* who treats them separately).

We welcome abstract submissions especially on lesser-studied languages. Our focus is on the morphosyntax of mass nouns and their constructional and derivational properties, including the following:

- **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 the 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? 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)?

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