At the margins of countability.
(Morpho-)syntactic and semantic evidence for countability of object mass nouns in two Creoles and their European lexifiers.

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In languages which show strongly grammaticalized number marking, object mass nouns (OMN) like Engl. *furniture* are mass nouns syntactically, but on the semantic level they pattern with count nouns, since they refer to a more or less heterogeneous plurality of discrete entities. Although they have become a prominent research topic notably in formal semantics focussing mostly on English (see Chierchia 2010), studies on languages without obligatory number marking are still scarce.

We investigate nouns in typical OMN domains (Mihatsch, 2016) in two Creole languages, the French based Reunion Creole and the Spanish based Papiamento. Unlike the Romance lexifier languages these Creoles show a highly flexible noun system with optional number marking and weakly grammaticalized determiners (Staudacher-Valliamée, 2004, p. 65; Kouwenberg & Murray, 1994, pp. 48–50). Basing our analysis on data from an acceptability judgement study, we compare the creole languages to their lexifiers as well as Portuguese, which shows some syntactic similarities with Creoles.

Given the flexibility of Creole noun system, we hypothesize a greater syntactic flexibility of OMNs in Creoles. Following on from this, we assume a greater acceptability of syntactic means of expression of countability (e.g. numerals) than in the lexifier languages, while semantic evidence for natural atomicity might show some differences between the languages, but presumably to a lesser degree. We further expect that Portuguese occupies an intermediate position.

The results indeed confirm our hypothesis and show that object mass nouns are easily accepted with stubbornly distributive predicates both in Creoles and lexifiers as well as in the Portuguese varieties. We do see some differences in the acceptability of distributive contexts and rather great differences between the languages as for the acceptability of uses in syntactic count contexts. Creoles do show some differences between the test and the control sentences, pointing to a particular syntactic status of these nouns, albeit in a subtle way. Both Brazilian and European Portuguese generally pattern with the Creole languages.

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