
In favor of derivationally early mass/count distinction

Olga Kagan & David Erschler

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

kaganol@bgu.ac.il, erschler@bgu.ac.il

There is an ongoing debate in the literature regarding the derivational stage at which the mass-count distinction emerges. While the classical approach treats it as present in the lexicon (Chomsky 1965; Quirk et al. 1972), it has also been argued that all nominal stems are born as mass. On such approaches, the mass-count distinction only emerges in syntax, at the level of DivP (e.g., Borer 2005, de Belder 2011, Mathieu 2012, Acquaviva 2019). We argue that the mass-count distinction is present at least as low as at the nP level. To do so, we observe that some derivational suffixes in Russian are sensitive to the mass-count distinction and to the related concept of a natural unit (NU). We demonstrate that these suffixes occupy the position not higher than that of n⁰.

Data. We consider four suffixes with quantificational, mass/count-related meaning: the collective *-nik* (*el' – el'-nik* ‘fir – fir grove’); collective *-jo* (*žul-ik – žul-jo* ‘swindler – swindlers’); singulative *-in-* (*-in₁*) (*gorox – goroš-in-a* ‘pea – a pea’); and massifier *-in-* (*-in₂*) (*svin-ja – svin-in-a* ‘pig – pork’). These suffixes determine the countability of the resulting noun, **and** impose restrictions on the input. Thus, the attachment of *-nik* and *-in₁* creates count nouns, whereas *-jo* and *-in₂* create mass ones. Further, *-in₁* can only apply to mass stems, whereas the other three suffixes are incompatible with mass stems (but fine with count ones). Thus, not only the mother node but also the sister node of these suffixes is specified as mass or count. What is the nature (and the “height”) of these nodes?

The suffixes as n⁰. We propose that the suffixes in question function as n⁰ heads. As such, they must appear below Div. Several observations support this analysis. The suffixes are not fully productive; the resulting meaning is not always fully compositional (with the exception of the singulative *-in*); the nature of the stem to which the suffixes attach is not systematic: sometimes this is a bare root; sometimes, a root and an additional low suffix, not always synchronously meaningful. Furthermore, the suffixes function as nominalizers, determine the gender/declension class of the noun and are incompatible with other overt n⁰ heads.

The level of the mass-count distinction. *-nik*, *-jo*, *-in₁* and *-in₂* impose countness or masshood requirements both on their sisters and the resulting nouns. Given that these suffixes are n⁰, all the expressions in question appear at the root level, lower than DivP. This shows that the mass-count distinction is already present by the nP level, i.e. (at least) at the stage when the stem is turned into a noun. Crucially, mass/count distinction is not purely conceptual – it is relevant for the grammar, determining which morphemes can, and which cannot, combine.