
Creativity in Nominal Mass-Count Coercions

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The categories of count and mass nouns are often defined morphosyntactically and in binary opposition to one another. Yet, many nouns in English can occur as both count and mass, sometimes termed ‘dual-life.’ These nouns display a variety of meaning shifts, or ‘coercions’ between their countable and uncountable forms. We present an empirical study of coercion, including several types of coercions that have not been previously observed. The study also recognizes that there are clearly two classes of coercion: one more conventionalized, such packaging uses, and one more creative in which novel interpretations arise in due to novel combinations of lexical semantics, syntactic construction and discourse context. Some of these creative uses include individuation of degrees or percentages, (1), or counting of instances or events, (2).

- (1) Barley was germinated in soils of two *moistures* (40 and 50 per cent).
- (2) Thirty-two *abolitions* against the death penalty took place in Europe

To better understand the distribution and kinds of shifts found in English, we created a dataset containing around 950 noun-sense pairs, taken from work by Kiss et al. 2016 and Grimm et al. 2021, and examples for each attested type of mass-to-count coercion. We first classify the syntactic triggers into four different contexts where a mass or dual-life noun was countable: a noun’s being possessed by multiple entities, a noun’s being in some sort of relational construction with multiple other events or objects, a noun in degree or percent measures, or simply being pluralized. Second, the meaning (or ontological) shifts fall into four general categories: type (often discussed as UNIVERSAL SORTER), ad hoc portioning (including UNIVERSAL PACKAGER), degree, and a ‘natural’ shift which occurs when speaking about individual atoms or particles of a natural kind.

Previous proposals for mass-count meaning shifts have discussed a number of these phenomena (Bunt 1985, Zamparelli 2020) but analyze them as a result of functions such as the UNIVERSAL SORTER and UNIVERSAL PACKAGER, which are presented as total functions, mapping denotations from one category to the other. In contrast, our study indicates that mass-to-count coercions are often more flexible and creative endeavors, involving a wider range of semantic domains; the speaker-hearer calculus for successfully uttering a creative mass-to-count coercion relies on both syntactic elements (and the compositional semantics thereof) and broader discourse context, while being heavily conditioned on lexical semantics.

References: Bunt, H. C. (1985). *Mass terms and model-theoretic semantics*. • Grimm, S., Moon, E., & Richman, A. (2021). Strongly non-countable nouns. In M. Dočekal & M. Wągiel (Eds.), *Formal approaches to number in Slavic and beyond* (pp. 57–81). • Kiss, T., Pelletier, F. J., Husic, H., Simunic, R. N., & Poppek, J. M. (2016). A sense-based lexicon of count and mass expressions. *Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation*, 2810–2814. • Zamparelli, R. (2020). Countability shifts and abstract nouns. In F. Moltmann (Ed.), *Mass and count in linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive science* (pp. 191–224).