

Portions and countability: a crosslinguistic investigation

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We examine three constructions in various languages in which a mass noun is embedded in what appears to be a count environment (involving measures, classifier-like elements, and/or pluralisation), but the construction as a whole remains uncountable.

- (1) ‘*Q-nouns*’ (Klockmann 2017)

John spilled $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} *three \\ *several \\ *many \end{array} \right\} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} lots \\ loads \\ heaps \end{array} \right\}$ of water.

- (2) *Bare measures*

Jan heeft (*drie) liters water gemorst.

John has (*three) liters water spilled

‘John has spilled liters of water’. (Dutch)

John spilled $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} *three \\ *several \\ *many \end{array} \right\}$ liters and liters of water.

- (3) *Pluralised mass nouns* (e.g. Tsoulas 2009, Alexiadou 2011, Kane et al 2015 for Greek; also in Yup’ik (Corbett & Mithun 1996), Ojibwe (Mathieu 2012), Innuttut (Gillon 2012), Old High German (Carr 1936), Blackfoot (Wiltschko 2012), Nez Perce (Deal 2013), Evenki (Nedjalkov 1997), Persian (Sharifian & Lotfi 2003), Indonesian (Dalrymple & Mofu 2012)

Trexoun nera apo to tavani

drip-3-PL waters-PL-NEUT-NOM from the ceiling-NEUT-SG

‘Waters are dripping from the ceiling.’ (i.e., ‘a lot of water is dripping from the ceiling’) (Greek)

In addition to their unexpected mass-ness, these constructions have several properties in common.

1. The expressions they involve generally function as genuine measure words or classifiers in different contexts. Measure words like *liter* typically appear in measure constructions like *three/several liters of water*, in which they serve to make the reference of a mass noun countable. Similarly, most Q-nouns are either synchronically or diachronically related to a countable noun expressing a certain unit or quantity. And in many languages that allow pluralisation of mass nouns, the construction has an (additional) countable interpretation meaning ‘pieces or portions of X’ (e.g. Innu-Aimun and Evenki (Nedjalkov 1997)).

- (4) a. There’s only two reams of printing paper left in the supply closet.

b. We need to analyse (*multiple) reams of data before we can draw any conclusions.

- (5) pimî pimî.a (Innu-Aimun; from Gillon 2010)

‘oil’ oil.INAN-PL ‘amounts of oil’ or ‘lots of oil’

The difference between (1-3) and their countable counterparts cannot be explained in terms of vagueness or a figurative use of measure words (e.g. *heap* ~ ‘unspecified large amount’), as vague quantities are not uncountable (*Drink three unspecified large amounts of water a day* is fine, albeit not particularly instructive).

2. These constructions involve different syntactic configurations from their countable counterparts. First, as Klockmann (2017) notes, in many Q-noun constructions the number of the DP as a whole is not inherited from the Q-noun but from the embedded noun (*Lots of water was/*were dripping from the ceiling*); the opposite holds for classifier constructions (*Three lots of furniture *was/were ruined by water damage*). Second, the fact that bare measures are obligatorily marked plural in Dutch (2a) indicates that they do not occupy their usual position as head of a measure phrase, as this position is not number-marked in

We take the behaviour of mass portioned-out predicates in exclamative constructions (as well as several other environments that test for the presence of a size ordering) to indicate that their denotation is size-ordered. We model this by building a degree relation into the semantics of the operator MP: $MP(Q)(P) := \{x | \dots \wedge \exists d[\mathbf{size}(d)(x)]\}$. The size scale imposes a trivial condition on the members of the portioned-out predicate, namely, that they have some size. Following Rett's (2015) analysis of the positive form of gradable adjectives (*Mary is tall*), we assume that such triviality triggers pragmatic strengthening of the predicate: the hearer infers that the size of the quantity in question falls on the informative higher end of the scale.

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