

The mass/count distinction in nouns for foodstuffs in German: A contrastive view

This paper investigates the count/mass distinction in the domain of aggregate nouns denoting foodstuffs in German in comparison to Russian and Chinese. The investigation suggests that although the morphological encoding of aggregates in German may differ from that in these languages, they nevertheless belong to the same grammatical class of uncountable (mass) nouns.

Nouns for rice, corn and potatoes in different languages have been assumed to denote **aggregates** – entities composed of units that habitually come together (Grimm 2012, among others). There is a great deal of variation in the grammatical encoding of aggregates in different languages, but also within one language. In German and Russian, aggregates in the domain of foodstuff may be encoded by mass nouns in the singular or by nouns in the plural. Many foodstuff aggregates encoded in German as plurals are encoded by singular mass nouns in Russian (e.g., Corbett 2000). For instance, names of berries, legumes and root vegetables which are plurals in German (*Erbsen* ‘peas’, *Möhren* ‘carrots’, *Erdbeeren* ‘strawberries’) are singular mass nouns in Russian (*gorox*, *morkov*, *klubnika*). But even in German, names of aggregates belonging to the same botanical class may be encoded differently; cf. *Zwiebeln* (Pl.) ‘onions’ vs. *Knoblauch* (Sg. mass) ‘garlic’.

It has been assumed that the two types of grammatical manifestation – singular mass vs. plural – correspond to two different countability classes. Mass nouns like *Reis* ‘rice’ are assumed to be uncountable, since they do not display a singular/plural contrast. **Plural aggregate nouns** like *Nudeln* ‘noodles’ have been assumed to be **countable** (Wierzbicka 1988, among others), since they display a singular/plural contrast (*Nudel*.SG – *Nudeln*.PL).

We will critically scrutinize the view that plural nouns denoting aggregates in German are countable. We will argue that although they are formally plural, it is not the plural of the respective singular but rather a **mass plural**. It can be shown that the behavior of plural aggregate nouns such as *Erbsen* ‘beans’ is substantially parallel to that of mass aggregate nouns like *Reis* ‘rice’ but significantly different from that of countable non-aggregate nouns in the plural like *Tische* ‘tables’ and *Bären* ‘bears’. **The first distinguishing criterion** for mass/count concerns the way of determination of the quantity. The quantity of a set denoted by the plural countable noun *Tische* or *Bären* can be determined by counting the particular individuals. However, the quantity of what is denoted by the plural aggregate noun *Erbsen* can be naturally determined by weighing an amount rather than counting the individual peas. The same applies to aggregates denoted by mass nouns like *Reis*. **The second criterion** is the combination with quantifiers. Like mass nouns (1), plural aggregate nouns can combine with non-individuating quantifiers like uninflected *viel* ‘much’, *etwas* ‘some/a bit of’ and *ein wenig* ‘a little’. Combinations like *viel Zwiebeln*, *etwas Bohnen* and *ein wenig Erdbeeren* occur in online portals for cooking but also in newspapers; cf. (2). Genuine count nouns do not occur in such combinations (**viel/*etwas Tische*, **ein wenig Bären*).

- (1) a. *viel / etwas / ein wenig Reis* ‘much / a bit of / a little rice’
b. *viel / etwas / ein wenig Knoblauch* ‘much / a bit of / a little garlic’

- (2) a. Aus der Auslage wählen sie die Zutaten für ihre Handmahlzeit: ein bisschen Rotkohl, *viel Zwiebeln*.
‘From the display they choose the ingredients for their hand meal: a little red cabbage, a lot of onions.’ [COSMAS, Die Zeit 19.02.2004]
b. *Etwas Bohnen* zurückbehalten, um diese dann in die Zwischenräume zu geben.
‘Retain some beans to add to the spaces in between.’ [<https://www.kochbar.de>, Mit-Bohnen-gefüllte-Paprikafruechte]
c. Ist es [das Sorbet] zu flüssig, noch *ein wenig Erdbeeren* hinzufügen.

‘If it [the sorbet] is too liquid, add a few more strawberries.’
[<https://www.ichkoche.at/erdbeersorbet-mit-rum-rezept-17747>]

The third criterion concerns the combination with classifiers. One of the properties of mass nouns is that they cannot combine with numerals directly but need a classifier, like nouns in Chinese (3).

- (3) shi gen luobo <Chinese, Zhang 2012>
ten CL carrot.MASS
‘ten carrots’

Mass nouns in German may also occur in classifier constructions like *zwei Körner Reis* ‘two grains of rice’ and *zwei Stück Butter* ‘two pieces of butter’, while countable nouns in the plural do not (Gunkel et al. 2017). Plural aggregate nouns behave like mass nouns: our corpus study reveals that they often occur with the classifier *Stück* ‘unit’ like in (4).

- (4) a. drei Stück Karotten
three CL carrot.PL
‘three carrots’
b. fünf Stück Kartoffeln
five CL potatoe. PL
‘five potatoes’
c. 100 Stück Kichererbsen
100 CL chickpea. PL
‘100 chickpeas’

All in all, our investigation reinforces the impression that one use of the plural of aggregate nouns in German has to be distinguished from the regular counting plural of count nouns. Although this plural of aggregate nouns is formally identical to the counting plural, it is outside of the number opposition singular/plural. It can be considered as an **inherent, lexical plural** in the sense of Acquaviva (2008). The inherent plural should be analyzed in the realm of word formation rather than inflection, by analogy with the collective *-a* plural in Italian, which however is formally distinct from the counting plural in that language. Thus, plural aggregate nouns in German belong to the same grammatical class of uncountable nouns as mass aggregate nouns in this language as well as aggregate denoting mass nouns in Russian and Chinese.

References

- Acquaviva, Paolo. 2008. *Lexical plurals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Corbett, Greville G. 2000. *Number*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Grimm, Scott. 2012. *Number and individuation*. Dissertation Stanford University.
Gunkel, Lutz, Adriano Murelli, Susan Schlotthauer, Bernd Wiese, Gisela Zifonun. 2017. *Grammatik des Deutschen im Europäischen Vergleich*. Das Nominal. Teilband I: Funktionale Domänen, Wort und Wortklassen. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
Wierzbicka, Anna. 1988. *The semantics of grammar*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Zhang, Niina Nina. 2012. Countability and numeral classifiers in Mandarin Chinese. In Diana Massam (ed.) *Count and mass across languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 220-237.