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The mass/count distinction in nouns for foodstuffs in German

A contrastive view

Keywords: mass/count distinction, number, plural

This paper investigates the mass/count 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, a. o.). 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 may be encoded by mass nouns in the singular or by nouns in the plural. In this paper we will focus on aggregate nouns for foodstuffs, since the context of food easily facilitates mass interpretation of such nouns. 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 (*Erbesen* ‘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 aggregate 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 all plural nouns denoting aggregates in German are countable. We will argue that although they are formally plural, it need not be the plural of the respective singular but it can be a **mass plural**. We will show that in one reading the behavior of plural aggregate nouns such as *Erbesen* ‘peas’ is substantially parallel to that of mass aggregate nouns like *Reis* ‘rice’ but differs from that of countable non-aggregate nouns in the plural like (*die*) *Bürgermeister* ‘the mayors. **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 (*die*) *Bürgermeister* can be determined by counting the particular individuals. However, the quantity of what is denoted by the plural aggregate noun *Erbesen* 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, plural aggregate nouns can combine with non-individuating quantifiers like uninflected *viel* 'much', *etwas* 'some/a bit of' and *ein wenig* 'a little' (1). 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/*ein wenig Bürgermeister*).

- (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. [COSMAS, Die Zeit 19.02.2004]
 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.'
- b. [<https://www.kochbar.de>, Mit-Bohnen-gefüllte-Paprikafruechte]
Etwas Bohnen zurückbehalten, um diese dann in die Zwischenräume zu geben.
 'Retain some beans to add to the spaces in between.'
- c. [<https://www.ichkoche.at/erdbeersorbet-mit-rum-rezept-17747>]
 Ist es [= das Sorbet] zu flüssig, noch *ein wenig Erdbeeren* hinzufügen.
 'If it [= the sorbet] is too liquid, add a few more strawberries.'

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) Chinese (Zhang 2012, p. 229)
shi gen luobo
 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 in one reading behave like mass nouns: our corpus study reveals that they may 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, one type of plural aggregate nouns in German belongs 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.

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