

Tea, eels, furniture, and cattle

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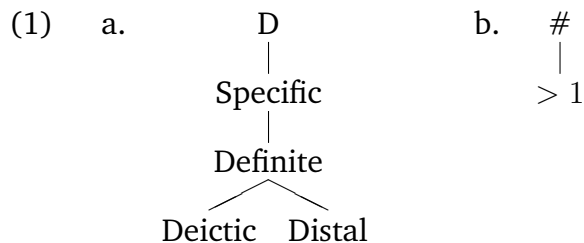
1. Coercion, conversion, or underspecification?

English has often been described as permitting conversion or coercion between count and mass nominals. Under this view, nouns may be underlyingly count or mass, but the Universal Grinder (Pelletier 1975) can turn any count noun to mass, and the Universal Sorter (Bunt 1985) can make any mass noun countable.

Our claim: Most English nouns are lexically unmarked for individuation.

2. The features

2.1 Feature geometries



- Semantic contribution of the features of # (Cowper 2005; Cowper and Hall 2006):

= individuated (absence of # = mass)
> 1 = plural (# without > 1 = singular)

- Semantic contribution of the features of D (Cowper and Hall 2002, 2006):

D = choice function (absence of [ϕ and] D = predicate)
 Specific = wide-scope indefinite (absence of Specific = narrow-scope indefinite)
 Definite = definite (absence of Definite = indefinite)
 Deictic = related to deictic centre (absence of Deictic = non-deictic)
 Distal = far/backgrounded (absence of Distal = proximal/neutral)

2.2 Features of vocabulary items

- (2) English vocabulary items spelling out subsets of (1)

a. Plural suffix, inserted in #:

V.I.	FEATURES
-s	> 1

b. Determiners, inserted in D:

V.I.	FEATURES	V.I.	FEATURES	V.I.	FEATURES
<i>a(n)</i>	D, #	<i>this</i>	Specific	THIS	Deictic
<i>the</i>	Definite	<i>these</i>	Specific, > 1	THESE	Deictic, > 1
<i>sm</i>	D	<i>that</i>	Distal	THAT	Deictic, Distal
∅	D	<i>those</i>	Distal, > 1	THOSE	Deictic, Distal, > 1

3. The easy cases: *tea* and *eels* and *teas* and *eel*

Ordinary English nouns, such as *tea* and *eel*, are lexically unspecified for any features of # or D, and may appear with or without #, whatever their lexical semantics:

- (3) a. The cup was full of [DP [NP tea]].
- b. I'd like [DP a [#P tea]], please.
- c. [DP The [#P teas]] of Sri Lanka are particularly nice.
- (4) a. My hovercraft is full of [DP [#P eels]].
- b. My hovercraft is full of [DP [NP eel]].

- With a number projection, nominals are interpreted as count.
- Without a number projection, they are interpreted as mass.

☞ Underspecification, *not* coercion or conversion

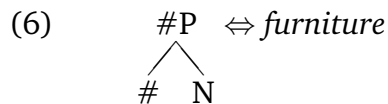
4. The uncoercibles

4.1 Furniture, equipment, and gear

Nouns like *furniture* are an exception to this general pattern. These nouns behave in some respects like *tea*, in that they can occur as bare singulars with an unspecified-amount interpretation. But they cannot combine with vocabulary items spelling out #.

- (5) a. The room is full of furniture.
- b. I ordered some furniture from Ikea.
- c. *I ordered a furniture from Ikea.
- d. *I ordered three furniture(s) from Ikea.
- e. *Of all the furnitures in the world, he had to pick Louis XV.

We propose that English nouns like *furniture* spell out both N and #—essentially, they are idiomatic words.



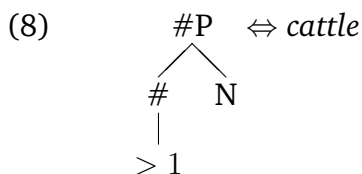
Their lexical semantics includes the information that they are collections of individuated items, with the (cancellable) implicature that the collection is non-singleton, while the grammatical feature # (without a dependent plural feature) forces singular agreement.

Because *furniture* itself spells out #, it cannot (following Cowper and Hall 2002) combine with any independent expression encoding number, either singular (the indefinite determiner *a(n)*) or plural (the suffix *-s*).

4.2 Cattle as a phrasal idiom

The existence of nouns that spell out # suggests that we should also find nouns realizing # and the plural feature > 1 —that is, words like *cattle*, which also cannot combine with *a(n)* or *-s*, but which trigger plural agreement.

- (7) a. Cattle are lowing.
 b. *Cattle is lowing.
 c. *A cattle is lowing.
 d. *Cattles are lowing.



5. Collective nouns and irregular plurals

5.1 Committees, groups, and teams

If *furniture* denotes a collection of discrete items, why doesn't it behave like *committee*, *team*, or *group*? Those can appear with elements spelling out features of number:

- (9) a. The matter was referred to **a committee**.
 b. **The committees** of the council meet every week.

And when they appear as bare singulars, they are interpreted as stuff, not as a collection:

- (10) There was **committee** all over the quadrangle.

We propose that collective nouns are simply Ns which, like most English nouns, can appear in the ordinary way as the complement of #, and are unspecified for individuation.

One thing we don't fully understand: Why do (11a) and (11b) pattern differently? Why can't we refer to the several pieces of furniture with a plural pronoun, when we must refer to the several committee members that way?

- (11) a. [The committee]_i was invited to the house for dinner.
 By six o'clock, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{they}_i \\ *it_i \end{array} \right\}$ had all arrived.
- b. [The furniture]_i was expected on Saturday.
 By six o'clock, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} *they_i \\ it_i \end{array} \right\}$ had all arrived.

5.2 Geese, mice, and men

If *cattle* spells out a plural #P, why doesn't it behave like *geese*, *mice*, and *men*, which, as irregular plurals, are stored in the lexicon as plural #Ps? Why doesn't *cattle* block *cows* the way *geese* blocks **gooses*?

The answer is embarrassingly simple: *cattle* isn't the plural of *cow*. In fact, it isn't the plural of anything:

- (12) *cow*+s: 'bovine animal, adult, female' + [> 1] *cattle*: 'bovine animal, [> 1]'
cow: 'bovine animal, adult, female' ?????: 'bovine animal'

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