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Countability: Vagueness and the Resolution of Overlap in Context

A major factor in the grounding of the mass/count distinction is the resolution/non-resolution of overlap in context. In order to support this thesis, we argue, also inspired by Rothstein (2010) and Landman (2011), that the interpretation of nouns relative to counting contexts also enforces a resolution of overlap in their denotations, which facilitates counting. We further argue for a typical difference between mass and count nouns (in line with Krifka 1989, and Rothstein 2010): namely, the lexical entries of mass nouns specify the null context as the context for evaluation, which allows for overlap making mass nouns uncountable, whereas the lexical entries of count nouns do not, which allows for the counting context for count nouns to vary from utterance to utterance. Adopting this semantics has three major benefits. We can predict on semantic grounds, for a large class of nouns, when we should expect to find mass/count variation cross- and intralinguistically. Second, we can explain why superordinate “object mass nouns” resist mass-to-count coercion, and third, why prototypical count nouns are harder to shift in count-to-mass coercion.