Countability distinctions and semantic variation

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Abstract To what extent are countability distinctions subject to systematic semantic variation? Could there be a language with no countability distinctions—in particular, one where all nouns are count? I argue that the answer is no: even in a language where all NPs have the core morphosyntactic properties of English count NPs, such as combining with numerals directly and showing singular/plural contrasts, countability distinctions still emerge on close inspection. I divide these distinctions into those related to sums (cumulativity) and those related to parts (divisiveness, atomicity, and related notions). In the Sahaptian language Nez Perce, evidence can be found for both types of distinction, in spite of the absence of anything like a traditional mass–count division in noun morphosyntax. I propose an extension of the Nez Perce analysis to Yudja (Tupí), analyzed by Lima (The grammar of individuation and counting, 2014) as lacking any countability distinctions. More generally, I suggest that at least one countability distinction may be universal and that languages without any countability distinctions may be unlearnable.

Keywords Mass–count distinction · Crosslinguistic variation · Nez Perce

1 Introduction

Cat is a count noun; blood is not. What is this difference? Much recent work has argued that nouns like these are actually different along two dimensions related to countability, not just one. The central argument comes from the behavior of nouns like footwear and jewelry, which behave like cat in certain respects and like blood in
others. In terms of pluralization, for instance, *footwear behaves like *blood, as seen in (1); in terms of combination with what Quine (1960) called ‘count adjectives’, it behaves like *cat, as seen in (2).

(1)  a. cats
    b. *footwears / *bloods

(2)  a. small cats / small footwear
    b. *small blood

Semanticists have arrived at a range of different conclusions concerning the semantics and syntax behind this distribution.\(^1\) One persistent consequence concerns the basic way the field of inquiry is described. If we have three classes of nouns to distinguish, rather than simply two, then it becomes potentially dangerous to speak of the mass–count distinction, using the singular definite. There are two distinctions which must be kept apart—one that groups cat and footwear together, and one that groups footwear and blood together. If we want to understand the crosslinguistic picture related to countability, we will need to assess the two distinctions separately. In principle, either one (or both) could be a locus of variation.

In this paper I investigate countability distinctions in Nez Perce, a language that lacks both a distributional contrast like (1) and a distributional contrast like (2). The singular/plural distinction applies to all NPs in this language, and all nouns may combine with all adjectives. Furthermore, all nouns seem to combine with numerals in the same way; Nez Perce also lacks a pattern like English (3).

(3)  a. one cat
    b. one *(liter/unit/bottle/type of) blood
    c. one *(piece/type of) footwear

The absence of any obvious countability distinction in the domains of numerals and number marking makes this language quite similar to Yudja, a Tupi language whose countability system has recently been analyzed by Lima (2014). Lima proposes that Yudja encodes no countability distinctions whatsoever. On this basis, she calls for a broadening of the crosslinguistic typology of countability.

The Nez Perce facts, on close examination, suggest a rather different conclusion. I argue that Nez Perce actually semantically distinguishes nouns like *picpic ‘cat’ from nouns like kike’i ‘blood’ in two ways, just as has been argued for English. What is needed is an explanation for why these distinctions do not have a visible effect in the obvious places. That is, if Nez Perce and English make the same semantic countability distinctions, why are there such differences in their numeral constructions and number marking? Why does Nez Perce not show distributional patterns like (1)–(3)? I propose a solution that may be applied not just to Nez Perce but also to Yudja, making it possible to maintain that all languages have at least one type of semantic countability distinction. In addition to its empirical advantages for Nez Perce, my proposal opens

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