

The semantics of count and mass nouns in Ndebele

Abstract

Count and mass nouns are often difficult to characterize. They have sometimes been distinguished from each other in terms of what they denote using criteria such as cumulativity of reference (Quine 1960) and divisivity of reference (Cheng 1973) although these notions have been criticized and found inadequate. However, later works (Bunt 1985, Krifka 1989; Deal 2017) have provided more acceptable ways of analysis which exploit both concepts. This study attempts to characterize count and mass nouns in one Bantu language, Ndebele (S44), using similar tools.

Bantu languages often have noun classes dedicated to mass nouns, normally classes 14 and 15 (a class of infinitives) which makes distinguishing count from mass nouns seem less problematic. The rest of the classes generally contain different types of count nouns although mass nouns may also be found in class 11, a singular class with most of its plurals in class 10. This study shows that in Ndebele the situation is more complex. Besides classes 11, 14 and 15, mass nouns are also found in other classes, both singular and plural, generally regarded as count noun classes. The paper investigates the lexical semantics of Ndebele nouns such as the ones in the examples below focusing on their countability properties.

- a. *um-fana om-thathu
1-boy 1-three
'three boy'
- b. aba-fana aba-thathu
2-boy 2-three
'three boys'
- c. *Ili-nzi eli-thathu
5-water 5-three
'three water'
- d. *ama-nzi ama-thathu (ok if understood to mean three containers of water')
6-water 6-three
'three waters'
- e. *ulu-ju olu-thathu (ok if understood to mean three containers of honey')

11-honey 11-three

'three honey'

f. *izin-ju ezin-tathu

10-honey 10-three

'three honeys'

Although the paper is generally descriptive important theoretical issues are pointed out and reference is made to the concepts mentioned above. The study shows that count and different types of mass nouns behave differently when used with quantifiers and qualifiers, cumulativity and divisivity together playing an important role.